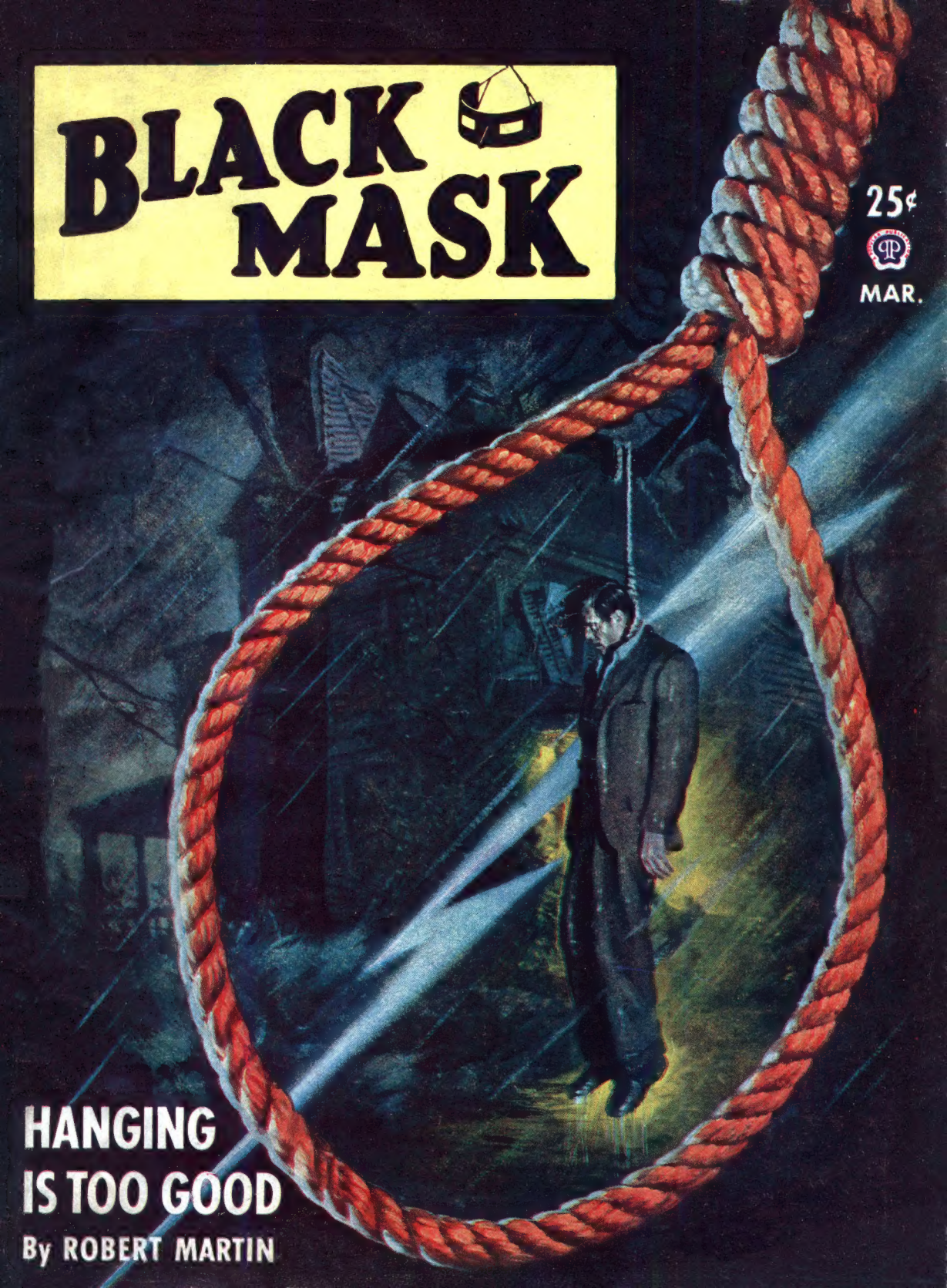
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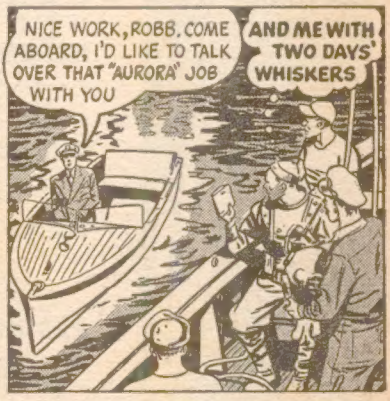

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BLACK MASK

VOL. XXXI, No. 2 MARCH, 1948

K. S. WHITE, *Editor*

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Cover painted for Black Mask by Peter Stevens

All Stories New
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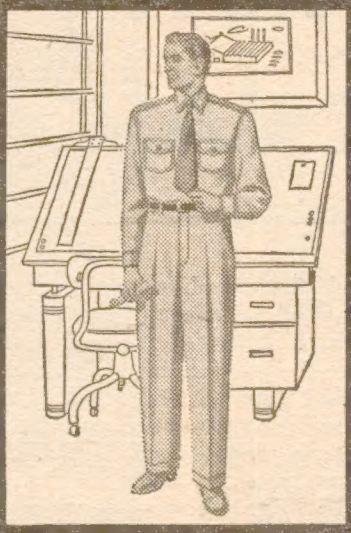

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MRS. COPE, hardboiled owner-publisher of the crusading *Times,* knew that Hillary Glidden was dead politically even before he telephoned her that night. When she picked up the phone and heard the sharp crack of pistol shots echoing through the receiver she knew that the crooked ward-heeler was *dead* period! . . . . That she hadn't guessed wrong was perfectly apparent when the coppers, at her summons, went to his home and found the politico stretched out on his bathroom floor, cold as a herring, a bottle of digitalis clutched in his stiffening hand. But there wasn't a bullet mark on his body and a conventional suicide note lay handy to the remains. Heart-attack was the verdict—but Mme. Cope knew better. *You can't hear a fatal heart attack put in its licks over Mr. Bell's ingenious invention no matter how sharp your ears!* Even the greenest cub could figure that out—and Mrs. Cope had been a newswoman for a good many years. Which is why she put her star reporter, Red Morgan, on the fatal job—and wound up a few nights later an integral part of a complicated *Pattern for Shrouds* in her own right. G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS sews up the loose ends and trims the bloody hemline next month in as startlingly plotted a midnight murder mystery as you'll read in many a gibbous moon.

* * * *

And CURTIS CLUFF brings back Johnny Ford, who melted the *Snow at Waikiki* a couple of issues ago, in another unusual detective yarn of the *aloha*-islands, *You'll Never Die Rich.* Not since Earl Derr Biggers thrilled a legion of crime-story fans with the Charlie Chan tales years ago have there been any murder mysteries set against an authentic Hawaiian background. Now Cluff has stepped into the breach and came up with as thrilling a slay-sequence as ever washed the palm-shaded strand at Waikiki with crimson, or interrupted the tempo of a ukulele-band with a victim's screams. You'll want to drape a *lei* around this new author's throat when he steers you to the strangler that wrote finis to the life of Libby Hart on her *lanai.*

* * * *

Plus exciting short detective stories and novelettes by NORMAN A. DANIELS, GEORGE F. KULL, DAY KEENE and RICHARD DEMING. This great May issue of *Black Mask* will be out March 19.

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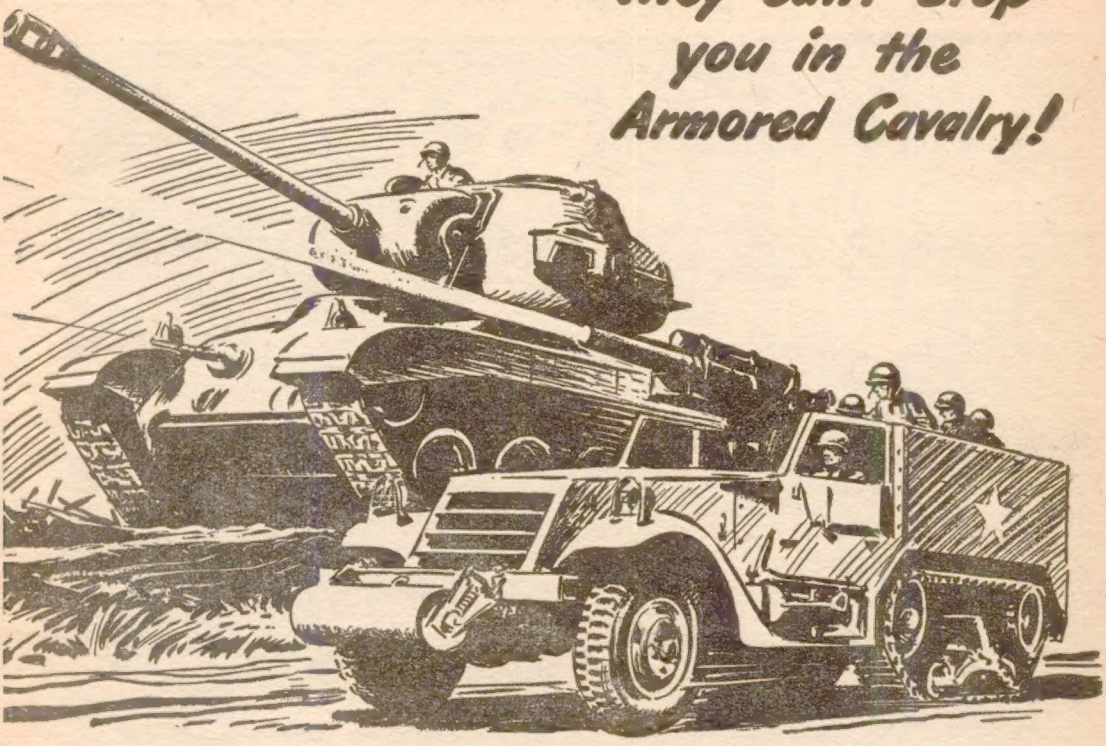

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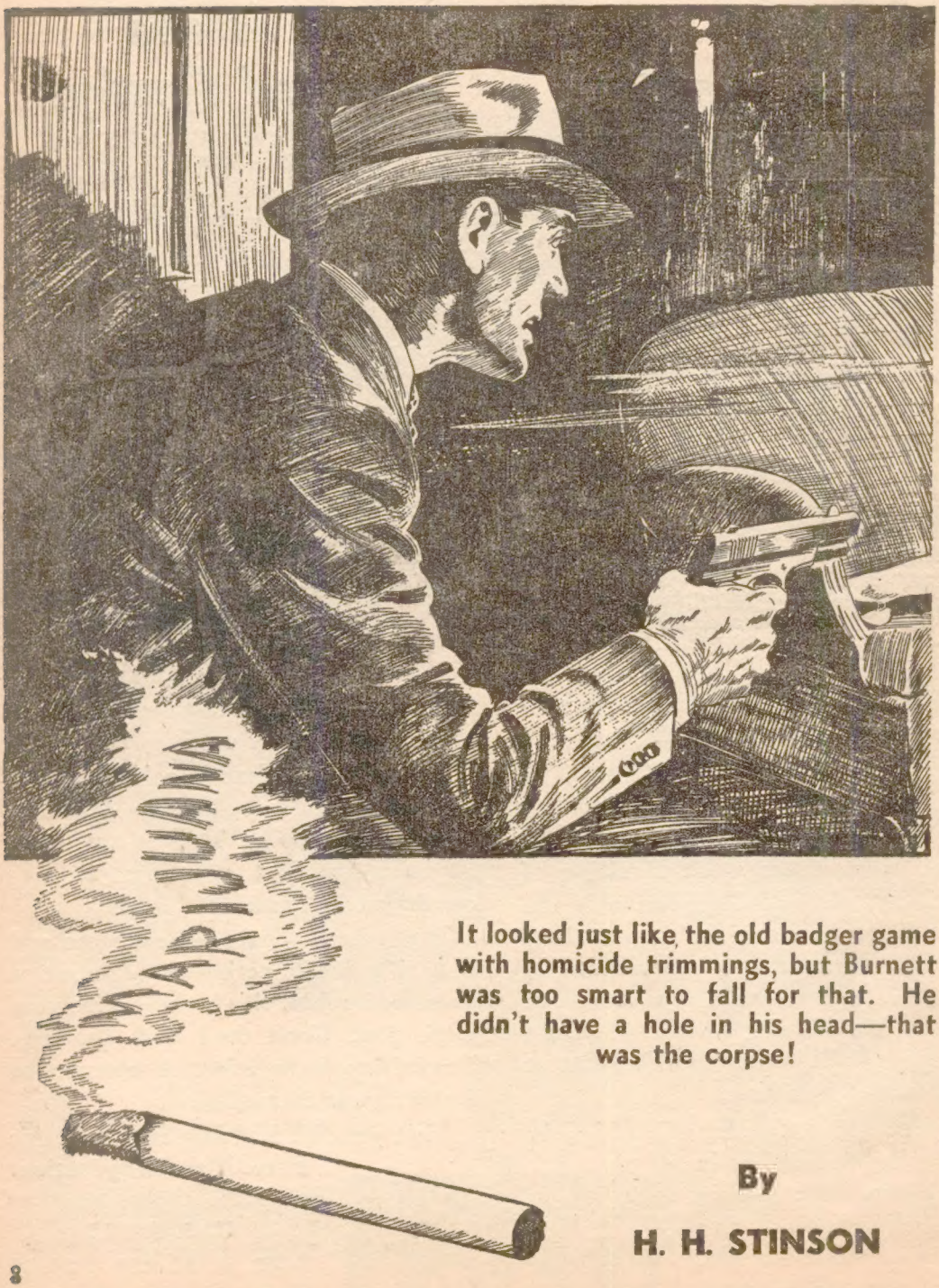
Burnett entered with his gun raking the room . . .

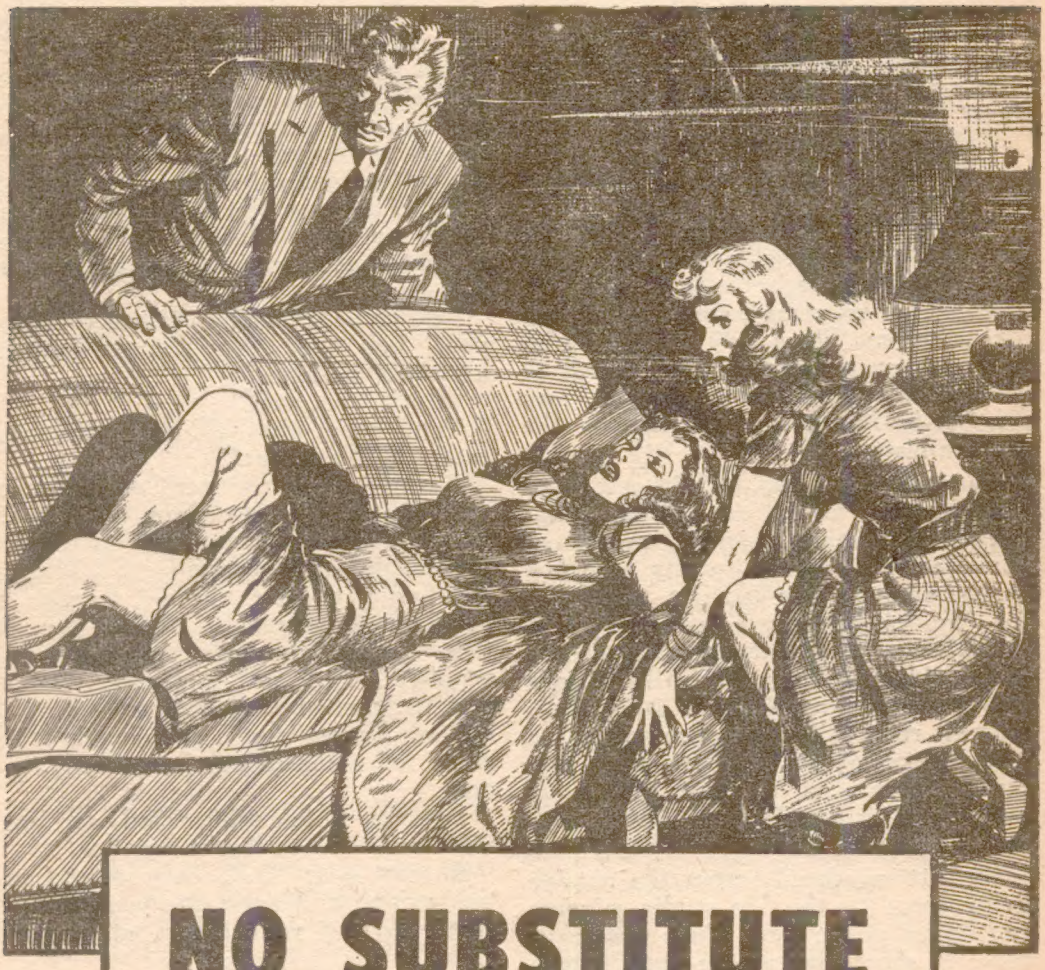


It looked just like the old badger game with homicide trimmings, but Burnett was too smart to fall for that. He didn't have a hole in his head—that was the corpse!

By

H. H. STINSON

. . . the man and the girl whirled from Maggie's side.



NO SUBSTITUTE FOR MURDER

MAC BURNETT patted his ex-wife, Maggie, on the shoulder and said: "Take it easy, hon." Then he looked down at Maggie's kid sister and said: "About this girl you claim you killed, Nita; who was she and where'd you meet her and what did she look like?"

Nita pressed clenched hands against her breasts and turned a stricken white face up at him. "B-but I told you, Mac."

Burnett was tall, wiry, as hatchet-

faced as an Indian and almost as dark. He shook his dark, hard-molded head. "Uh-uh—so far you've just been sputtering."

Nita began to cry again, her nineteen-year-old face contorting itself into unpretty lines. Burnett glanced at Maggie and said: "Get her something to drink, hon."

"I'll make some coffee, Mac."

"Brandy will be better—it'll pump her up faster."

He watched Maggie go toward the kitchen. She was redhaired, green-eyed, still as slim and desirable as the day he'd married her six years before. She looked like a kid, not like a lady executive who had parlayed a knack for designing clothes into high-bracket income and *Clothes-by-Margaret* shops all over the fashion map.

She looked soft, too, but Burnett knew that was just an optical illusion. Their battles had been memorable, mainly because he was a stubborn guy with low tastes, among them being a preference for a modest career as a private eye to a lucrative one as partner-by-marriage in a dressmaking business. Life with Maggie had been exciting while it lasted but, Burnett reflected, it was nice now to be able to look at her and not run a fast pulse. He cocked an inner ear to his pulse—well, it wasn't much faster, anyway.

Burnett wandered across the outside living room to the big studio window and looked at the view, which was beautiful. It should be; at the rent Maggie paid for her Holly Towers apartment, the view should have included eighteen-carat clouds and a diamond-studded skyline.

LOU FRENCH got up out of a big wing chair and came over. He was young, as tall as Burnett and maybe a little huskier. He was good-looking, too, if you liked blond men with pink skins. Burnett had always felt that Lou wasn't a bad guy—for a dress salesman.

Lou said, low-voiced: "Lousy jam, Mac."

Burnett nodded. He bent his mind away from Nita's troubles and onto Lou French. The last time they'd met, Lou had been one of Maggie's shop managers. From the way he was at home in Maggie's apartment and his tone when he'd called her "Darling" a couple of times, Burnett had an easy time figuring the guy had now jumped a lot of notches in Maggie's business—and personal—life. Burnett suddenly decided he didn't think much of the idea. Not that he was jealous—hell, no. It was just that the guy was a lightweight, not the right type for Maggie.

"We've been looking all over town for you," Lou said. "You'll know how to hush this up, Mac."

"Hush it up, huh?"

"You know what it'll do to Maggie's career if it gets out."

Burnett didn't comment on that. He saw Maggie come back from the kitchen and he walked over, watched Nita down the double jigger of brandy that Maggie had brought. The kid did it with a practiced movement of throat muscles that nineteen-year-olds shouldn't have acquired. That was something else he and Maggie had battled about—his antiquated notion that kids shouldn't be given too much money, too much freedom.

Presently Nita's sniffles died away and red came into her cheeks, her lips.

Burnett said: "O.K., baby, start from the beginning. Maggie says you left here alone, driving your coupe, at six last night."

"I was to meet a boy named Les Wallace for dinner."

"Know him pretty well?"

"I met him a month ago at a party and we've been out a few times since. He was always nice. He's in the insurance business and he lives at the Rosswyn Apartments. He was pretty high when I picked him up and then we went to the Sirocco Room on the Strip and had some drinks and not much dinner. Then we went to the Bambalina and after that to the Fiesta Club and I guess I was getting pretty high, Mac—" She gave Maggie a shamefaced look. "We kept

going here and there on the Strip and I remember a couple of places on Melrose and one on Beverly. Somewhere we picked up another couple. The man was named Chuck and he had a funny, pinched-together face like a Pekinese and the girl was sort of a plump blonde. Somewhere along the line we sort of lost Les Wallace—"

"The boy phoned this morning," Maggie supplied. "He said he must have been fed a mickey. Anyway, he woke up in Nita's car on a parking lot this morning. He was pretty worried but I told him Nita was all right."

"I'll check the guy," Burnett said and looked at Nita, waiting.

"We kept going and then—I don't know how—I wasn't with Chuck and the blonde girl any more but with another couple. The man was dark and good-looking and the girl was redheaded and we were in a place called the Ubangi Club. The man said, why didn't we go some place and have some dreams? After a while we were in the living room of a little apartment—it's not clear how we got there—and the dark man was showing me how to smoke a marijuana cigarette. I can remember it tasted sort of sweetish, but then I began to feel wonderful and happy and the room stretched out until it was as big as the Coliseum and I was sort of floating. I told the dark man how happy I felt. Then the redheaded girl got mad and said I was trying to take her man and she was going to kill me. And a voice inside my head began to say I'd better take the gun out of my purse and shoot her before she killed me. So I took the gun out and shot her and she fell down." Nita suddenly began to cry again. "Oh, Mac, if I ever get out of this—"

"Now take it easy," said Burnett. "How'd you happen to be carrying this gun?"

"I don't know—I've never had a gun. But something seemed to tell me there was one in my purse then."

"After this shooting, what happened?"

"The girl fell down and the dark man and I went on smoking and after a while I went to sleep. When I woke up, it was daylight and I saw I'd been sleeping on a sofa." She shuddered. "The girl was there on the floor with blood on one side of her face. The dark man came in from another room. He looked awful. He said: 'Well, sister, you certainly stopped her clock. You better get out of here.' I was so sick and horrified, I couldn't say anything. He said to keep my mouth shut and maybe he could fix everything. Then he gave me a dollar and let me out and I went down to the street and walked a while until I found a cab. Then I came home."

"This dollar business," said Burnett. "Didn't you take any money with you last night?"

"She had some money, not much," Maggie said. "But, in addition, she was wearing a valuable platinum fox jacket and about fifteen thousand dollars' worth of jewelry, some of it hers, most of it mine. When she got home, Mac, she had no jacket, no jewelry, no pocketbook. I can give you a list of the jewelry."

"Later, hon. You got any idea, Nita, where this apartment is?"

"It's in a redbrick building on Sunset near Carroll and there's a public tennis court on one side. I remember that from this morning. The apartment was next to the elevator on the third floor—but I don't remember which side."

"Anything else I ought to know?"

Nita's tears began to leak again. "Nothing, Mac, except if I get out of this, I'll never, never—"

Maggie said: "Bed for you, baby. You need rest."

Nita got up and went out of the room. Maggie looked at Lou French. "Lou, get on the phone and cancel all my appointments for the next few days."

"Sure, darling." French went down the long room to a phone.

Burnett growled: "That guy getting important to you, hon?"

"He's manager of all the shops now."

"I mean personally."

"I like him. Any objections?"

Burnett nodded darkly. "He's not the guy for you."

There were green sparks in Maggie's eyes. "That's your opinion and you're

stuck with it. It's too late for you to do anything about it."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," said Maggie. Suddenly she seemed to wilt a little. "Mac, don't ride me. I'm—I'm going almost crazy."

Burnett growled: "Don't jump off bridges before you come to them, hon. I've got a hunch on this business—it sounds like a not-too-new version of the old badger game. The kid had valuable furs, lots of jewelry. She was taken for it and the loogans want no squawk. So they put on a murder act while she's floating in the clouds, show her a phony corpse when she comes to and give her the rush act out of the place. Maybe there's even a spot of future blackmail involved inasmuch as they kept her purse and must know who she is. So I'm rambling over to the joint for a look around. I don't think I'll find any corpse or even a sign of murder. But if I do—" He left it in the shape of a question.

"Yes?"

"Lou said something about hushing it up."

Maggie looked at him and then her glance went away. She said: "I—I don't know just how it could be hushed up."

"You and me, hon," said Burnett. "I'll ring you in a while."

SUNSET at Carroll is about halfway between the Plaza with its Mexican atmosphere and Hollywood with its incredible atmosphere. The only atmosphere at the corner of Carroll and Sunset is the dreary one of small stores, filling stations, a fourth-run movie house and dingy apartments.

Burnett parked across from the tennis courts where a fat girl in shorts and a beanpole of a man, also in shorts, were batting the ball back and forth. The red brick apartments beyond the tennis courts had a painted sign on one side that said it was the Angel Apartments. Burnett thought the angels wouldn't be flattered. He jaywalked across the boulevard and went into a lobby that smelled as musty as a long-closed trunk. There were names and bellpushes on a square of unpolished brass, but none of the names meant anything to him. He skipped an automatic elevator that looked as though it had been built in the McKinley Administration and chose stairs that wound around the elevator shaft.

At the third floor there were doors either way from the elevator shaft and Burnett took a chance on the one to the left.

He punched the button and a boy about ten years old opened the door, looked at Burnett and called: "Ma, he looks like an installment collector."

Burnett could hear pots and pans banging. A woman's voice shouted: "Tell him we ain't got the money until the fifteenth."

"We ain't got the money until the fifteenth," the boy reported. "But if you want the radio, come in an' get it. It's busted, anyway."

Burnett said: "I'll be back the fifteenth, sonny."

The door closed and Burnett went past the elevator shaft to the other door and punched the bell a couple of times. Then he leaned on it for maybe a minute. Nothing continued to happen and Burnett used the time to inspect the lock. It was an old lock, as weary and battered as the building itself; a blind old lady could probably have worked her way through it with a hairpin. Burnett used a small square of celluloid and stepped into a short dark hallway, eased the door shut behind him.

In the hallway the air was cold, dank, heavy with a sweetish smell almost solid enough to carve into slices—the memory of a reefer party. From the hallway Burnett could see most of a dingy living room.

He could see no female body in there, no corpse of any kind. He made a rough, pleased sound in his throat and stepped into the living room and then made a shocked sound in his throat.

There was tumbled feminine clothing on the floor in the corner beside the archway. The whiteness of a woman's thighs thrust out from the swirl of an upturned skirt. The skirt had cocked itself up over the woman's shoulder, obscuring the

lower part of her face. A wide-brimmed hat with a gay little cockade at one side had been mashed down to hide practically all the rest of her face.

Burnett sucked air back into his lungs slowly and then used the air to curse briefly, flatly. He took two steps, leaned down and put his hand on the exposed flesh of a thigh. The flesh was cool, solid, under his fingers. He stood up and looked around the room. The half-light seeping through downpulled shades was enough to show dust here and there, little drifts of lint in corners; either the place had been unoccupied for a while or the tenant didn't worry much about cleaning up. The overstuffed set was old and lumpy, the rug was threadbare, the radio set had been new about the year that Amos 'n Andy began their air career.

Open doors showed a kitchen to one side of the living room, a bedroom to the other. Burnett took the kitchen first. Mold grew on dirty dishes in the sink. In a cupboard there were a few odds and ends of packaged foods, clean dishes, a dozen glasses. Three of the glasses sparkled with recent washing, the others showed dust. In a refrigerator there were three eggs in a bowl, dried-out sardines in a dish, an uncooked steak which had grown green fuzz.

The bedroom and a small bath showed equal evidence of disuse. But the closet held a man's suit, a worn topcoat and one pair of shoes, and the dresser contained a meager assortment of shirts, socks, ties, underwear and half a dozen letters.

The letters were all addressed to one Harry Simon at that address. Five of the letters were ads and the sixth was from Oklahoma City and was signed "Nettie." Nettie wrote that she had just found out that Harry had got her in trouble and what was he going to do about it?

The postmark was a year old so Burnett figured that Nettie was out of trouble by now.

He went back to the living room and stared somberly at the girl. Presently he went over and knelt down beside her and began to do what he'd been putting off—examining the body. He pulled the dress down and saw that it was a flowered gingham housedress over which was a green cloth coat.

Easing the cockaded felt hat off, he saw that the girl—she looked, actually, to be a woman around thirty—had been brown-haired, dark-eyed, probably very pretty.

It was a little difficult to make sure about the latter, since a bullet had gone in the back of her head, made a large bloody wound of exit under one eye. The blood that had collected under her head was dark, thick, stringy.

Her purse, if she had had a purse, was gone. There was nothing in the pockets of the coat, no label in the collar. Her hands, her throat, her ear lobes bore no jewelry of any description.

Burnett got up and went through the apartment again, using his hankerchief on the cupboard and refrigerator handles in the kitchen, on the knobs of the closet and the dresser in the bedroom. He did the same for the inside knob of the hall door and then let himself out, massaged the outer knob just enough with the handkerchief.

He saw nobody in the hall, nobody on the stairs as he went down to the lobby. He jaywalked back across Sunset, climbed into his car and glanced up at the third floor where shades were drawn on the windows at one side. The ten-year-old kid was in the window at the other side of the third floor. He put one thumb to his nose, rippled the rest of the fingers at Burnett. Burnett concluded that the kid didn't like installment collectors.

He drove three blocks, found a drug store and got on the phone.

Maggie came on at the other end of the wire after a single ring. When she heard his voice, she said breathlessly: "Mac, is—is it all right?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? I don't understand. Is it or isn't it?"

"It's a very wacky picture, hon. We've got to talk. Meet me at the Copper Grill and we'll gnaw a steak while we try to puzzle things out."

CHAPTER TWO

Homicide Trimmings

BURNETT was halfway through a thick steak, baked potato and green salad when Maggie arrived. Lou French arrived, too, and steered her solicitously down the aisle toward Burnett's booth. He was so very solicitous that Burnett thought it might some time be a pleasure to slug the guy just for luck.

They took the seat across from Burnett. Maggie's green eyes, the rouge on her lips formed the only spots of color in an otherwise wan face. A waiter came over and Maggie said: "I couldn't eat a bite."

Lou took his cue from Maggie. He looked at Burnett's sturdy meal with revulsion, said: "Me, too, Maggie."

Burnett decided that some time he was definitely going to slug Lou French. He said: "Hell's bells, Maggie, you know nothing ever affects my appetite. A dick has to be that way."

Maggie said impatiently: "You could eat a horse, Mac, and nobody would care but the horse. All I'm interested in is —did you find a—a—"

Burnett nodded slowly, forked another cube of steak. Maggie's face went whiter, if that was possible, and she breathed: "Then Nita did—what she said. It wasn't just an act to scare her!"

Burnett swallowed the steak, shaking his head. "I didn't say that."

Maggie stared at Lou and said: "I don't get it, Mac. If you found a body in the apartment, then Nita did—what she said."

Burnett looked around. There were no waiters within earshot, the booths to either side of them were unoccupied. Nevertheless he kept his voice down. "It could have been the right apartment, the wrong body. Here, briefly, are some of the points in Nita's story, some of the facts I picked up at the apartment. Nita said the girl she shot was a redhead. I found a girl who had brown hair. Nita told us she met her girl in a night club. The girl at the apartment wore a housedress and other duds to match, all of it stuff that gals don't go night-clubbing in. Nita said she saw blood on the girl's face when she woke up this morning. The way my girl was laid out, her hat and the hem of her dress covered the face. Finally, the closing hour is two A.M. Assume that Nita and the couple didn't leave the spot until that time, that it took them half an hour to get to the apartment, that they waited a while before hitting the smoke, that it took some time for the kid to get happy. A couple of hours for all of that is a generous estimate. So Nita's girl has to be dead by four A.M. Judging by the condition of the blood my girl had spilled, I'd guess she was knocked off a lot later."

Maggie's face had got more and more relieved. "Then Nita couldn't have—"

Burnett said: "Maggie, some time you'll bust your g-string jumping to conclusions so fast. Nita could have been so hopped up she'd mistake brown hair for red. It's possible, though not probable, that a girl would wear a housedress to a nightspot. Someone could have arranged the girl's clothing to hide her face after Nita left. And my guess about the condition of the blood could be wrong."

Lou French said: "Damn it, Mac, why build up Maggie's hopes only to knock them down? If you think Nita did it—"

"I'm saying there's enough discrepancies between Nita's story and what I found to make a guy wonder what really happened."

"Any idea who the girl was?"

Burnett shook his head. "There was no identification of any kind on her."

Lou French massaged one pink cheek for a moment. Then he said: "I'm satisfied from what Mac tells us that Nita's in the clear on this. So you can forget the whole thing, Maggie."

Maggie thought that one over and shook her head. "Suppose someone saw Nita leave the place. They'd give that information to the police when the body is found and—"

"But if the body isn't found there?" Lou said.

Burnett growled: "What's it going to do—turn into a potted geranium?"

"You and I could manage it," Lou said steadily. "Tonight—out the back way—"

Burnett snorted, shook his head hopelessly. "I told you the guy was a lightweight, Maggie." He scowled at the blond man. "Even if I went in for snatching bodies, the chances of getting a corpse down two flights of stairs and through an apartment lobby undetected would be about one in ten—or maybe a hundred. It'd be just the same as phoning the warden and asking to have a cell reserved."

Lou French looked stubborn. "It could be done. I think enough of Maggie to try anything to get her out of this jam."

"Meaning I don't, huh? Listen—"

Maggie said crossly: "Will you two stop acting like strange Airedales?" She got out a cigarette. Burnett snapped a match lit and held it out. Lou French spun flame onto a gold-plated lighter and extended it. Maggie used a match of her own. She said: "Mac is right. It would be foolish to complicate this any further by moving a body. But something has to be done—I've got to know whether or not Nita's involved." She looked at Burnett, waiting.

Burnett said: "Well, if we went to the cops—"

"Are you crazy?" Lou French snapped.

"Not yet," said Burnett, "but you're sending me, pal, you're sending me. What I was trying to say was that if we went to the cops, we'd probably unwind the case in a hurry. But it would mean nasty publicity for Maggie and the kid, no matter where the guilt was eventually pinned. A better—but maybe slower way is to try to crack it quietly and hand it, already wrapped up, to the homicide squad. If the kid is clean on it, we can keep her name out of it completely. If she did do it, we take a lot of the heat off and get her probably no more than a manslaughter rap by taking the story to the cops, beating them to the punch."

"Cops, cops," Lou French grated. "Suppose the kid is involved—we couldn't spill it to the cops. You know what that would do to Maggie."

Burnett flexed the fingers of his right hand, flexed them into a fist, unflexed them. He said, controlling his voice with an effort: "Maggie, if you want Lou to handle this, just say so."

MAGGIE said: "Keep quiet, Lou. And you, Mac, don't be so touchy. We'll do it your way. What's the first move?"

"The dark man Nita told us about seems like the key to the business. He'd know whether Nita shot anyone or not and, if we can locate him, I've got some tricks that make guys talk. There's a chance he might be one Harry Simon, the tenant of the apartment at the Angel Arms. I'll buzz around the neighborhood there when we finish this session and see what I can learn. But my hunch is that the dark guy used an apartment that was temporarily unoccupied. That leaves us the job of following Nita's trail of last night. I know a girl op and a young guy who can be her escort and I'll put them on the job tonight, starting them at the Sirocco and having them go down the line on the lookout for the Peke-faced man and the blonde. If this is the old badger game, as I think, Peke-face and the blonde are bird dogs for the dark guy—they locate the suckers and turn them over. So, if my ops make contact with this couple, I'll instruct the boy to fall by the wayside and give Peke-face and the blonde a chance to do their stuff. And I'll be hovering for a swoop on the dark boy."

"I don't want anyone in on this that doesn't have to be," Maggie said. "I'll be your girl op."

Burnett said: "Hmmm. At that, hon, you could be. You've got the guts, the looks and the clothes."

"And Lou can be my escort."

Burnett said: "Good cripes, no. This could turn into something rugged and I might need real help."

Lou French's eyes pulled in deep. He was a little white around the lips. He said: "Maybe I sell dresses, Mac, but I'll lay you dough I'm as tough as you, maybe a little tougher."

Maggie put her hand on Lou French's sleeve. "Will you get the car from the parking lot, Lou?"

Lou French rubbed his teeth together bitterly for a moment. Then he said: "O.K., darling. But I still think Mac's ideas stink." He got up stiffly and went out.

Maggie said: "Quit riding Lou."

"He's a lightweight."

"Maybe, maybe not. But it's sort of nice for a change to have somebody who'd do anything for you—anything."

Burnett growled: "I was always willing to do anything for you that was good for you."

"Even though we rarely agreed on what was good for me."

"On this I'm right—covering up murder isn't good for you."

Maggie sighed: "Do you hear me arguing? Where do we start tonight?"

"The Sirocco Room at eight o'clock. That'll give me time to do some checking on the Harry Simon angle. Hit the places on the Strip and then work down toward Wilshire. You and Lou put on a progressive drunk act. But don't get drunk. If you pick up the Peke-faced guy and the blonde—from the kid's description, you can't miss recognizing them—Lou is to pull a passout. That's important because this mob probably goes only for lone women. You go on with the Pekinese man and the girl. And don't worry if you don't see me. I'll be right on your heels every minute, hon."

Maggie stood up, buttoned her gloves. She smiled at Burnett and said: "Mac, you'd be a wonderful guy if you weren't so hard to get along with."

"I know what you mean—if I was a mushhead like your friend, Lou French."

"Oh, what's the use of trying to be pleasant to you?" Maggie said and went away.

When Burnett left the Copper Kettle, a prankish cold wind had sprung up. It whipped stray bits of paper down the sidewalk, raised whorls of dust, banged signs and bit through Burnett's suit coat. He looked at his watch, decided that he had time to get a topcoat before doing his job of checking on the tenant of the Angel Arms apartment.

Five minutes later he parked in front of his apartment on Edgemont and went upstairs, whistling softly. He unlocked the door of his one-room-and-bath and walked in.

A chunky, youngish man, who was all in brown—hair, eyes and excellently-tailored suit—sat in Burnett's favorite armchair, drinking a highball that, by the evidence of a bottle, had been made from Burnett's favorite rye. The youngish man was Sergeant Thad Clark of Central Homicide. His grin was cheery but he still looked like trouble to Burnett.

He said: "Hi, Mac. Long time no see."

Burnett had halted just inside the door. Now he came in the rest of the way, closed the door behind him. He smiled at Clark but his dark eyes had turned hooded and wary. He said: "Been a while, Thad. Nice of you to drop in."

"I was around this way and I just happened to have a skeleton key that fit. Have a drink?"

"That's nice of you, too."

"Think nothing of it, Mac. I got this liquor for free." They both laughed. "Doing anything special tonight?"

Burnett got himself a glass, mixed a drink of the rye. He looked over the rim of the glass at the sergeant. "What's on your mind, Thad?"

"The skipper wants to see you."

"Why?"

Clark shrugged thick shoulders. "How would I know? I'm just the errand boy."

Burnett drank slowly, using the time to frame his thoughts. He choked a little and coughed, using up more time. Finally he said: "Matter of fact, I've got a date, a big and luscious date, tonight. I'll drop in on the skipper tomorrow."

Clark looked unhappy. "Mac, you know the skipper—when he wants something, he wants it now or even sooner. You wouldn't want to make things difficult." His eyes said that as a cop he knew what to do if Burnett was difficult and that, as a friend, he hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

Burnett said irritably: "O.K.—but I've still got a date at eight o'clock."

He got the topcoat he had come for and they went out and downstairs. Burnett turned toward his coupe.

Clark said, "We might as well burn the taxpayers' gas," and led the way around the corner to a police sedan.

It took them fifteen minutes to get down to the City Hall, during which time Clark told a long and pointless story about how he had received a tip on a killer wanted in Georgia and how the guy had turned out to be not a killer and not from Georgia. The purpose of the story, Burnett divined, was to keep him from asking questions that Thad Clark didn't want to answer.

They rolled into the garage on the Main Street floor of the City Hall, Clark nudged the sedan into a stall and they went upstairs, along a marble corridor and around a corner to the door of the Homicide Bureau. Two dicks—Perez and Malone—were hunched over a domino game in the squadroom. They nodded at Burnett and the sergeant and went back to their game.

Clark and Burnett marched the length of the squadroom, Clark opened the door of the skipper's inner office and they stepped in together to an empty room.

"Hmm," said Clark. "The skipper isn't here."

Burnett grinned. "You city dicks pick up little things nobody else would notice. Well, I've got a date at eight o'clock. I'll drop in tomorrow."

"Oh, sit down, kid, sit down. He'll be back any minute."

They sat down but the skipper didn't get back any minute. They talked about baseball, Thad Clark's new baby, the next municipal election and a place over in Sonoratown where you could get the best chili in the city. Darkness filtered down into the big rectangular lightwell around which a half-dozen of the detective bureau offices, including that of the homicide squad, were grouped. Lights sprang on and stayed on in the switchboard room at the end of the rectangle; lights went on in other offices and went out again presently. Burnett saw Captain Johansing of the Missing Persons Detail, a nut on fresh air, carefully adjust the windows of his office so that they were open an inch top and bottom; Johansing didn't like to come down to a stuffy room in the morning. Burnett saw the lights go out in Missing Persons.

His watch said seven-forty and he cursed silently and debated whether he could get away with just walking out. He hadn't reached a decision on it when the door opened and Captain Manning walked in.

THE skipper was a big man with white hair and good-natured blue eyes and an air of never being ruffled by anything. But behind his calm mien and his amiable glance, he was as hard as nails and, in connection with his job, as relentless as a glacier. He shook hands genially with Burnett.

"We haven't seen you for a long time, Mac."

"So Thad said." Burnett grinned. "I didn't know you boys ever missed private ops being around."

Clark winked at him and went out and the skipper gestured toward the chair near his desk. Burnett took that chair and Manning let himself down into the desk chair, grunting a little. He arranged his bulk, fired up a half-smoked cigar and said through blue haze: "Mac, down here at the department we like you. We're your friends. But to keep friends, you got to play ball with them."

"Why, sure," said Burnett. "Just name what you want, skipper, and you can have it."

"Why, Mac, didn't you report that murder over at the Angel Arms?"

Burnett wasn't too surprised. He hadn't been able to think of any reason for his having been brought down to headquarters other than in connection with the Angel Arms affair; although he hadn't as yet the faintest notion of how the killing had been discovered and how he had been linked with it. He let his mouth drop open for a moment and managed to stare at the skipper in a surprised way. He said: "Murder? Angel Arms? Why didn't I report it?"

Manning wagged his white-thatched head and said mildly: "Skip the ham acting, Mac. Around four this afternoon you rang the doorbell of a Mrs. Garcia on the third floor of the Angel Arms.

Pete Garcia, age ten, answered the door and said he took you for an instalment collector. But he got suspicious when you didn't act tough about being stalled off like a collector would. So he watched you through a door crack and saw you let yourself into an apartment at the other side of the elevator shaft. He knew the occupant there, one Harry Simon, has been in jail for the last three weeks on a drunk driving conviction. So when you left, the kid took your license number and called Central Station. A pretty smart kid."

Burnett had sensed all along that he was in a spot. Now he saw just how tough a spot it was. If he talked at all, it meant involving Maggie and Nita; where murder was concerned the skipper thought less than nothing of the convention that a private dick's client was entitled to privacy. If he didn't talk, the skipper would have him there all night, hammering at him.

Meanwhile, Maggie would be touring a lot of dives, counting for protection on a shamus who wasn't there.

Burnett stalled, knowing it probably wouldn't do him any good. "Smart kid? I wouldn't say so—writing down the wrong license number."

Captain Manning smiled patiently. "Now, Mac, we're friendly to you and we want to stay that way. This is a tough one. This girl that was killed—"

Still stalling, Burnett lifted brows. He said: "It was a girl, huh?"

The skipper cleared his throat "Not quite a girl. I guess you'd call her a woman. A quick autopsy showed she was going to have a baby in a few months. There was no identification on the body. We haven't got a lead, Mac, except that we know you went to that apartment this afternoon. You know about this killing, boy." He leaned forward a little and drummed thick fingers on his desk. "You're the key—and, by cripes, we're going to turn you."

Burnett stood up. "Skipper, I give you my word, I'm absolutely in the dark on any killing at any Angel Arms." That much at least, he thought grimly, was the truth. "Just now I have a date and I'm going to keep it unless you can figure a charge to hold me."

Manning's calm was unbroken. "I can accommodate you, Mac—suspicion of murder or material witness. Take your choice."

Burnett shook his head. His glance flicked the darkness of the lightwell. He said: "I've got a good lawyer, skipper. He'd have me out on a writ in an hour with proof that I wasn't within miles of the Angel Arms at four o'clock." He seemed suddenly struck with an idea. "Look, suppose you get this Garcia kid down to look at me. He'll tell you I'm not the man he saw, that'll ease your mind and I can be on my way." He jerked a compelling thumb at the squadroom door. "Go on out there and tell one of your domino players to get him."

For the first time a faint crease of uncertainty appeared on the skipper's brow. He chewed at his cigar, finally got up. "Naturally I was going to have him look at you and it might as well be now." He went to the door, opened it, stepped far enough into the squadroom so that only his massive back could be seen. "Perez."

Burnett by that time had taken three noiseless steps from the skipper's desk to the skipper's open window. He could hear Manning's voice rumbling but the massive back was still turned.

Burnett lifted a long leg over the skipper's windowsill, eased out into the lightwell and crossed fast to the window of the Missing Persons Detail. The sash came up smoothly, he stepped down into darkness and a moment later was letting himself out into the corridor.

The door of the press room down the hall opened at the same instant and a lanky, towheaded character, who was Shep Jackson, beat man for the *Tribune* emerged. Shep was, as usual, fairly high. He spied Burnett and descended on him, weaving a little. He grabbed Burnett's hand and wrung it.

He burbled: "Good ol' Mac Burnett! 'S wonderful t' see you, Mac." He squinted at the door Burnett had just closed. "Missing Persons, huh? Y' got a story for me 'bout a missing person?"

Burnett tried to disengage his hand.

He said: "Right now, Shep, I'm practically Mister Missing Persons, himself. Be seeing you, laddie."

Somewhere around the angle of the corridor, a door was banged open and feet began to drum on the marble.

Shep clung to the hand, said: "Aw now, Mac, give! Wassa story?"

Burnett flung a glance over his shoulder, saw the skipper barge into sight at the corner, his face red and angry, one hand dragging a gun from under his armpit. Burnett swung Shep Jackson around, heaved and sent the reporter staggering and skidding on the marble toward the skipper. Stretching his legs, Burnett made time toward the stairway that led down to the garage.

The skipper's voice, bull-loud, yelled: "Burnett! Halt or I'll—damn it, Shep, look out!"

Burnett swerved for the stairway and from the tail of his eye saw Shep Jackson weaving, rubber-kneed, in front of the skipper. He saw the skipper try to dodge around the newshawk, saw them collide and go down in a tangle of legs and arms.

Then Burnett was heading downward. He popped into the gloom of the garage, sped past a row of parked cars, turned onto the ramp and slowed his pace. He was sauntering when he stepped past the doorman, hailed a roving cab and climbed in.

"The Sirocco Room out on the Strip, bud."

He rode for a few minutes, scowling darkly at the back of the hacker's head. The stunt he had pulled on the skipper would pile up plenty of trouble for him; if it had been anyone else but Maggie who was jammed up, he'd have had better sense than to risk his license and a kicking-around when the homicide boys caught up with him.

He thought: Hell, this puts Burnett right on the same shelf with Lou French —just another lightweight who'd do anything for a redheaded, green-eyed mouse.

There was only one way to land on his feet. All he had to do was crack the case inside of the next few hours and present it to the skipper with love, kisses, apologies, a murder, a motive and all loose ends neatly tied.

"And that, my friend," he muttered to himself, "is a trick that'll be good if you do it."

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Muddle

AS THE cab rambled out Beverly toward Hollywood and the Strip, Burnett studied the driver. The guy rolled nicely, never seeming to hurry but never missing an opening. He was young, alert, lantern-jawed. When they finally got within a block of the Sirocco Room, Burnett had made up his mind. He dug out a ten-dollar bill.

The hacker pulled up at a gaily-striped canvas marquee and Burnett leaned over and said through the window: "Don't pop your flag, bud. I'll be going here and there and when I need a cab, I'll need one fast. Oke?"

The hacker turned and gave Burnett a slow, appraising eye. He said: "Cop?"

"Private."

"It's a job."

Burnett passed him the ten-spot. "There's more when your clock eats that up."

He climbed out, watched the cab pull down the block and anchor.

His watch said eight-forty. By this time Maggie and Lou French had probably gone on from the Sirocco Room. But it was best that he start there. He went inside to the bar and then on to the dining-room archway. The crowd didn't contain Maggie and her pink-cheeked escort.

It was the same at the Bambalina just down the block. In rapid succession he hit the Fiesta Club, the Matador, the Green Room, Zilly's, the Cockatoo and the rest of the big spots on the Strip, worked his way then through the smaller places and finally had covered the entire section without running across a trace of Maggie and Lou French. He stepped to the curb, signalled the lantern-jawed hacker, who had trailed him from spot to spot.

Climbing into the cab, he said: "We'll try some of the drums on Melrose."

The hacker got going. He said: "One thing about jobs like you and me got, we get around and meet a lotta people."

"But tonight," said Burnett, "not the right ones."

"If I knew who you was looking for, pal, I could help. I know plenty of these characters that play the joints out here."

Burnett didn't know why four eyes wouldn't be better than two. He said: "I'm looking for a redheaded gal, five-three, about one-ten, glamorous gams, a pin-up face."

"You sound personal about her, pal."

"Just a client."

"Well, when I see one like that, I'll whistle—and you'll know it's a wolf."

It took Burnett twenty minutes to make every spot on Melrose from Fairfax to Vine without seeing Maggie and Lou French.

He climbed back in and said: "Beverly Boulevard."

They began at Beverley and La Cienga and worked down toward the Pan-Pacific Auditorium. As Burnett came out of a place called the Trap Door, he heard a wolf-whistle from the cab, which stood with its motor idling across the street. He dodged fast-rolling traffic to reach the cab in a hurry.

"I think I spotted the wren," said the hacker. "A bricktop, swell-looking in furs. With another dame and two guys."

"Where'd you see her?"

"She and them just went in that dive back there, the one you was in before you looked in the Trap Door."

Burnett looked in the direction of the pointing finger and saw a sign that said: "The Gargoyle." He said: "Thanks and keep your horse saddled up."

He re-crossed the boulevard and went back to The Gargoyle which was two storerooms knocked into one and fitted up with a bar on one side and a series of booths on the other with a few tables between. Red-shaded and low-powered bulbs left the room dim and managed to tone down the dinginess of the place. A male piano player with a shallow dead-pan face rippled the keys of a red painted spinet piano and a girl with black hair and lots of bosom rendered a ribald parody of "Five Minutes More."

Burnett didn't see Maggie. He ranged himself against the bar and ordered a rye highball. The song ended and there was a splatter of applause and, above that, Burnett heard Maggie's laugh. It was loud and uninhibited and came from the last booth. Her voice was just as loud when she followed the laugh by observing that she "wanted 'nother drinkie and then go some places. Have fun, 's what I say."

Burnett grinned a little, partly from relief and partly in admiration of Maggie. He'd told her to put on a drunk act and, by cripes, she was putting on a masterpiece.

He moved up three stools at the bar so he could angle his stare into the last booth. He could see Maggie beside a little guy with pinched-up brown features and big, brown, thyroid eyes. The guy couldn't be anyone but Nita's Pekinese-faced man.

Burnett went out and crossed to the cab. The hacker switched off his radio as Burnett approached and said: "Did that do it, pal?"

"That did it—and it's an extra ten bucks for you."

"Glad to help," said the hacker. "You know, I get a kick out of a job like this. I'm interested in detecting. I been thinking maybe some time soon I'd try for the cops. So what gives now?"

"A tail job."

"My dish, pal, my dish."

Ten minutes later Maggie came out of the Gargoyle on the arm of the Peke-faced man. Lou French and a bosomy blonde came out on their heels. They went around into the parking lot and presently a green Cad popped out of the parking lot and headed east on Beverly. Burnett could see Maggie's red thatch beside the driver. He muttered: "That's it."

The hacker gave the sedan a block start and eased out after it. The chase led to a bar on La Brea. From there the quartet drifted on to, in rapid succession, spots on Wilshire, Sixth, Vermont. Sit-

ting in the cab near the last stop, Burnett suddenly ground out an irritated, impatient curse. He climbed out, went into the place—the Cucaracha Tequila Tavern—and perched on a stool at a gaudy chromium-and-plastic bar.

MAGGIE, Lou French and the other couple were at a table halfway down the room. Burnett tossed down a rye straight, swiveled off the stool and went toward a sign that said, "Men." He dragged a thumb with a come-along motion across Lou French's sleeve as he passed the table.

Three minutes later Lou French came into the men's room and heeled the door shut. He said: "Mac, where the hell have you been?" His voice was thick but he wasn't very drunk.

Burnett skipped the answer to that one. He said: "That's the pair but they're not going to lead up to the dark guy as long as you stick around. When are you going to fold up, like I said, and let us get some action?"

Lou French said hotly: "If you think I'm going to desert Maggie when she's—"

The door opened and a mousy little man came in. He was high and he took his time washing his hands, combing his hair and telling Burnett and Lou French about how he was out from Pennsylvania for a visit and this country was swell for a vacation but personally he liked to live where you had a change of seasons. It took him five minutes to get that off his chest and get out.

When he'd gone, Lou French said: "That's no act that Maggie is putting on—she's plastered to the ears."

"Maggie's plastered?" said Burnett. "After I told her to bring her hollow leg?"

"She's higher than a weather balloon. I'm not going to leave her in that condition."

"Aaaghhr," said Burnett. "I might have known you'd fall down on the job."

"I—I fell down on—why, you—say, for a nickel I'd slug you—"

Burnett stopped Lou French's sputtering by facing him toward the door and shoving him. He said: "Take Maggie home and I'll tail Jojo, the dog-faced man, and his blonde and hope they'll lead me to something."

Burnett waited a full minute after Lou French's departure. He wasn't happy. He'd go on covering Jojo and the blonde but he was afraid now that the evening had been wasted because they'd probably figure it was too late to pick up another pigeon and the trail wouldn't lead to the dark man. And, with the skipper bitter at the trick he'd been played, this was no evening to be wasted.

He lit a cigarette and stepped out into the bar.

The table at which Maggie, Mister Pekinese and the blonde had been sitting was now vacant. Burnett hurried his stride toward the front door. He hadn't expected the party to dissolve quite that fast. He brushed the leather-padded doors out of his way and stepped onto the sidewalk—and had to stop fast to keep from slamming into Lou French.

French's face, even in the inadequate light from the street lamps, showed white.

Burnett demanded: "Where's Maggie?"

"Gone!" Lou French's voice rose. "She and that couple were gone when I came out of the washroom. I ran out to the street and her car was just turning the corner onto Third. Hell, Burnett, we've got to do something—anything might happen to her if they find out who she is, and what she's trying to do. Damn it, we've got to do something fast!"

Burnett's look had gone dark, taut. His clenched teeth showed white between thin lips. He turned wordlessly and began to run toward the patch of yellow where he had left the cab. The distance seemed longer than it should have been but that perhaps was because time had suddenly shrunk; if he could get going instantly, there was a bare chance of overtaking the green sedan somewhere on Third Street since, for a mile or so, the only cross streets led off to quiet residential districts.

He got to the cab and saw that the

front seat was empty. He cursed, looked up and down the street. There was a hamburger joint a block north, an open filling station in the middle of the block, the lights of an all-night drug store a block south. The hacker could be in any one of those spots but which one didn't matter now; there'd be no chance of routing him out in time to catch the sedan.

Burnett turned and Lou French, at his heels, said: "Well, do something. You're supposed to be a detective, Mac, you've got to know something to do!"

"Clam it," Burnett said heavily. He started back toward the Cucaracha. "This is a tough one. I've got to think."

"High time you did some thinking. Meanwhile, Maggie may—"

"Someone in that joint may know where Jojo and the blonde hang out. If not, I yell for the cops and an all-cars broadcast."

"If we let the cops in on it, the whole thing comes out."

"Did your waiter seem to know the pair?"

"No."

They got back as far as the door of the Cucaracha and a cab came drifting down from Beverly. It swerved to the curb in front of the Cucaracha and the alert-faced young hacker leaned out.

"Hey, bud!"

Burnett whipped around, looked at the hacker, looked down the street at the splash of yellow where the other cab stood. He said: "Brother, I was looking for you long and loud."

"I seen that redhead come out with the other couple and you wasn't around."

"So you tailed them?"

"Nothing else but. I ain't dumb."

Burnett said fervently. "Dumb? Beside you, the atom busters are mental cripples." He pulled the cab door open, bundled Lou French in, climbed through the door and slammed it. He said. "Dig in your spurs, pal."

The cab spurted, turned onto Third. The hacker said: "They wound up at a place on Delmar Street."

Lou French let out a long, relieved sigh. He said: "It's lucky somebody had a brain—and it certainly wasn't that of Mac Burnett."

The hacker turned and gave Burnett a long stare.

Burnett yelled: "Look out for that car! What the hell's wrong with you?"

The hacker yanked his wheel, straightened out. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing's wrong with me."

They buzzed over the hill at Commonwealth, swooped down to Delmar and rasped tires in a right turn. Halfway down the block the cab slowed. The hacker said: "It was one of these houses along here. I seen 'em get out of the sedan and go in."

THE houses that flanked the street there were not all of a pattern but they did have a sameness that dated back to the days when Los Angeles was Iowa-conscious and people built frame houses with lots of curlicues and cupolas and with porches.

Burnett said: "You didn't get the number?"

"Too dark. I figured we'd find the sedan in front. But I don't see no sedan."

"You've still earned another extra sawbuck," Burnett told him. "Pull down—at the next corner in case somebody's watching."

Burnett and Lou French climbed out at the corner and walked back along the block under the heavy shade of pepper trees until they were in the exact center of the block. Of the half-dozen houses indicated by the hacker, one had a porch light blazing, another showed lights at an uncurtained upper window and the others were dark, slumbrous.

Lou French muttered. "This is a hell of a note. No telling which place they took her. They might even have gone on from here. If you had any brains, Mac, you might try blowing them out some time. Of all the dumb stunts—getting us both in that washroom while they walked out with Maggie."

Burnett didn't make a comeback because of his own opinion of himself at the moment was near a record low. He said: "Stick here in front—and don't be conspicuous."

He turned up his coat collar to hide the whiteness of his shirt front and melted into the darkness alongside a hedge that edged a driveway. The driveway led him past a house and to a single-car garage, the door of which stood ajar. He fished out a pencil flash, shone it momentarily at the car inside. It was a small, brown coupe.

He went around the garage to an alley and then into the next yard. The garage there, a double, was empty. The third garage he tried was locked but there was a window at the side and his flash pushed against the glass, shone on the green hood of a sedan that was either Maggie's or its twin. He studied the house. It was a two-storied, yellow-painted frame structure, spacious but shabby. An unscreened back porch ran the width of it. No lights showed.

Burnett went down the alley to Fourth Street and around to Delmar. He didn't see the helpful hacker or his cab at the corner but was too preoccupied to speculate about that. He found Lou French in the gloom beneath a pepper tree.

Keeping his voice low, he said: "Got a gun with you?"

"Yes. Did you locate the right house?"

"Maybe. A car like Maggie's is in the garage behind that yellow place."

Lou got a small, neat automatic out of his pocket, jacked it and said: "What are we waiting for? Let's bust in there and if they've hurt her in any way, by God, I'll—"

"Slow up. Crashing in would be a swell way to get a flock of cops here in a hurry, especially if that car isn't Maggie's but just one that looks like it."

"Then what do we do, master mind?"

"I'll ease into the place quietly from the back and have a look around. You cover the front in case anyone exits that way."

Burnett went around to the alley and presently was standing in the back yard of the yellow house. It was quiet and dark as before. He crossed a raggedly-cut lawn, mounted the steps to the porch and tried the back door, the windows at either side of the door. All were bolted.

Retreating to the yard, he looked up at four windows that made dark rectangles against the lighter wall of the house above the porch. A tree thrust gnarled and leafless branches upward against the corner of the house. Two minutes later he was stepping from an upper crotch of the tree onto the porch roof. The second window he tried was unlocked. He got it open slowly and quietly and stepped down into a darkened room that smelled faintly of a woman's perfume. He could hear nothing but his own quickened breathing.

Working his way cautiously around the walls, he found a door and inched it open. A square hallway was faintly visible in light that filtered up a flight of stairs from the floor below.

He could hear voices now but could distinguish no words. When he stood in a lower hallway, which was lit by a small globe in a wall bracket, the voices were louder but he couldn't as yet make out what was being said. He moved through

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an archway toward the sound and found himself in a big, shadowy room. Light seeped out from beneath a door at the far end of the room. Burnett crossed to the door and stood beside it. His gun was in his hand now.

A woman's voice said urgently: "I think we ought to wind this up and get out of here."

"Calm down," said a man. "No reason we can't wait."

The woman said. "The redhead passing out like this changes everything. Why the hell did she have to pass out?"

"We might have expected it," the man grumbled. "She was higher than the price of Scotch when we left the Cucaracha with her."

"I still say finish out our job on her and be on our way."

The man cursed. "O. K., Gert, do your stuff then. I never saw anything like you dames for having ants in the pants. So get busy on her."

Burnett scowled sourly. He'd wanted to do an eavesdropping job for a while but he couldn't chance just standing around now. He turned the doorknob with his left hand, whipped the door open and took one step past the threshold to stand with his gun and his dark, narrow stare raking the room. The Peke-faced man whirled about to face the door, the blonde girl jerked up straight from the stooping position she had been in at Maggie's side.

Maggie lay on a frowsy divan, her eyes closed, red hair disheveled, one arm trailing on the floor. The blonde had been halfway through the job of getting the mink coat off Maggie.

Shock jarred the Peke-faced man and the blonde into silence for a moment.

Then the blonde yelped: "W-who are you?"

"How'd you get in here?" the man cried.

Burnett gestured no more than an inch with the muzzle of his gun. "Dig your noses into that wall, both of you."

The woman said shrilly: "Chuck, I told you we shoulda scrammed. Didn't I tell you?"

"The wall," said Burnett.

The pair moved to the wall, faced it. Burnett frisked them swiftly, found no weapons. He backed to the divan, felt Maggie's pulse. It was strong, regular, rapid. He said: "Relax, punks."

The Peke-faced man and the girl turned. The man snapped: "Just who the hell are you?"

"Not the census taker but I've got as many questions. Mainly about what happened at the Angel Arms."

The blonde ran a tongue-tip across quivering lips. "Listen, anything that happened there, mister, happened after we—"

Chuck snarled: "Button up, Gert." He looked at Burnett nastily. "Brother, you smell like shamus to me but in my book that makes no never-mind. We ain't done anything wrong. This gal came here with us of her own free will."

"Sure—and that mink coat was coming off her all by itself. Who's the dark guy that worked with you last night?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Is a Lousy Break

A VOICE from the room beyond the door said: "Why don't you come to headquarters for that information, pal? And drop that rod before you collect a slug in the belly."

Burnett's eyes wheeled toward the doorway. He could see the dim figure of a man in the other room but he couldn't tell whether or not the man held a gun. Burnett swore silently and for a moment hung onto his own gun, tempted to snap a shot at the indistinct figure, to battle it out. But he gave that idea a quick brush-off; he was standing beside the divan on which Maggie lay and she would be directly in the line of fire if shots began to fly.

He relaxed his hand and the gun thudded to the floor.

The voice from the other room said: "Kick the rod away from you and, Chuck, you pick it up."

Burnett toed the gun away from him and watched Chuck dart forward and scoop it up. Chuck said: "O. K., Nick."

The dim figure moved, stepped through the doorway and materialized into a man of medium height, olive-skinned, sloe-eyed, black-haired, nattily dressed. His face was smooth and unworried,the automatic in his right hand was unwavering.

He said, not taking his eyes off Burnett: "What goes on, Chuck? There was a guy on the front porch—"

The blonde shrilled: "A guy on the front porch! Listen, I'm getting out of here."

"Quiet, Gert. I surprised the guy, beaned him and carried him inside. He's asleep in the front hall and won't be snapping out of it for quite a while."

Chuck said: "This yokel's been throwing his weight around here like a cop, Nick."

A tiny wrinkle of concern sprang onto Nick's smooth forehead. His black eyes bored at Burnett. But he said easily: "A cop, huh? Well, so what—we haven't done anything the cops would worry about."

"That's a funny way to talk about murder," said Maggie's voice. Burnett turned a startled look over his shoulder and Maggie made an upward grimace at him. She was sitting up now. "I was just playing possum, Mac, hoping they'd talk out of turn. And now that they're all here, the talk might as well start."

Breath rasped in the blonde's throat and pulled all eyes to her. Her shaking finger accused the dark man. She forced out: "Murder, huh? Oh—my—God, Nick! You promised you never would—you gave us your word! You said—"

Nick clipped: "Chuck, slap her trap shut!" His face was no longer smooth and nonchalant; it was furrowed now by apprehension, twisted by something between panic and anger. He snapped at Burnett. "Brother, you people have stuck your necks out a mile—because I might as well make it two or three or four as one. So talk fast! Just whatta you got on me? Come on—spill!"

Chuck moved suddenly from the corner where he had been rooted. His face showed fright in every line and Burnett's gun was lax in his hand. He bleated: "I want no part of this, Nick. I'm scramming."

The dark man's look was pulled around from Burnett toward Chuck for a moment. Burnett wasted no time; he bunched leg muscles and launched a dive at the dark man. The distance was too great and Nick's eyes slid back at him. He saw Nick's finger whiten with trigger pressure but it was too late then to halt the dive.

Something hit the dark man from behind. The automatic went off but Nick was falling forward and the bullet plowed into the floor. Burnett braked his own fall with his hands, felt Nick skid across his back, snarling like a cat. Another body came down on Burnett and he shouldered out from under it and swung a right that landed on a man's jaw. The man, who was Lou French, had been trying to get to his feet. The blow laid him flat again.

Burnett got his head up in time to see the dark man leaping through the doorway into darkness, and Chuck and the blonde heading frantically for the door. He tripped the blonde and Chuck fell over her and Burnett ripped his gun from Chuck's hand as the man went down. Maggie shouted over the uproar: "Mac, go after the other man! I'll hold these two—go on!"

Burnett whirled and saw that Maggie was holding a small, shiny gun. She cried: "I had this in my purse all the time. Go on—go on, Mac!"

The front door banged shut and, on the heels of the sound, Burnett took off. He slammed through the darkened room, through the hall, almost took the front door off its hinges, and was on the sidewalk in time to see Nick cutting across a front lawn no more than a hundred yards away. Flame lanced from Nick's gun and a slug sang within a foot of Burnett's skull. He snapped a shot in return but Nick vanished between houses without faltering.

Burnett sprinted and made the house corner. Two shots banged out from the back yard and Burnett flung himself flat, waited. A shape detached itself stealthily from the shelter of an arbor and made

for the alley. Burnett steadied his hand, squeezed the trigger. Nick cried out but kept on going in a sort of broken-kneed run, made the alley and turned right.

He was not in sight in the alley when Burnett got there, although street lamps made a frame of light at both ends of the block, light that would have silhouetted him—and that most certainly was silhouetting Burnett.

He pulled back to the fence line, moved along sidewise, his gun balanced alertly, his stare raking back and forth at patches of shadow. He neared the bulk of a telephone pole and was half a dozen feet distant from it when Nick stepped out. He lined his gun on Burnett as Burnett's gun came around.

The explosions locked. For a frozen moment Burnett waited for his nerves to telegraph his brain where the dark man's slug had hit; then, with a sort of pleasurable amazement, he realized the lead had gone wide. But he hadn't missed. Nick bowed slowly at the waist. The gun fell from his grip. One hand sought the support of the telephone pole and he slid slowly downward, curled up at Burnett's feet. He began to groan.

Burnett knelt beside him. "Talk fast, Nick, and then I'll get you an ambulance."

"Forget the ambulance. I'm—done for. You got me—through the guts and —a lung. How'd you—know about the —killing?"

"I found the girl's body at the Angel Arms."

The groans halted. "What—girl?"

"The girl you shot at the Angel Arms."

"Are you—nuts? There was no—girl killed. We—faked a shooting—but nobody—hurt. I thought you wanted—me for—East St. Louis."

"East St. Louis?" said Burnett, a little bewildered.

"I killed a —cop there couple—years ago." Nick began to laugh. The laugh was weak, bubbling with blood, ironic. "Hell, this is—lousiest break in my—life."

Burnett said: "If you didn't kill the girl at the Angel Arms, who did?"

"Dunno– maybe Chuck—he had key and was—always playing around with—tramps. Hell, what a lousy—break!"

He stopped talking. After a moment he retched. He retched twice and then lay still. Burnett stood up and looked down at Nick's body dully. He was still staring at it when a uniformed policeman popped into the mouth of the alley, waving a gun dramatically.

He yelled: "Halt or I'll shoot!"

"Halt?" said Burnett. "Hell, I'm stopped in my tracks."

The cop came down the alley and took Burnett's gun. He said: "Is this part of the riot that started in that yellow house?"

"Yeah."

The cop turned and yelled to his partner who now stood at the alley entrance. "Go tell Manning I've got a guy that's shot and the guy that shot him."

"Need an ambulance?" said the second cop.

The first one knelt and felt Nick's wrist. "Nope—the meat wagon." He got up and glared at Burnett. "Don't you try any bright tricks now, brother."

"The way I feel," Burnett said, "I'm not bright enough to know any tricks."

IT WAS only fifteen minutes before the skipper emerged from the back yard of the yellow house into the alley and bore down on Burnett and the watchful cop. To Burnett, worrying about Maggie and what she might be saying and what the cops might be doing about that, it had been fifteen years. He needn't have worried about Maggie. Maggie was with the skipper and he was holding her arm gallantly, helping her past non-existent holes in the pavement. Lou French tagged along behind them.

The skipper boomed: "So this is your girl friend, Mac!"

"Is she?"

"She says so and any guy that lucky would be nuts to contradict her. She's been telling me how she and this gent helped you tonight."

"They did fine," Burnett said. "Incidentally, how'd you happen to get here so fast?"

"We had a broadcast out on you, Mac

—wanted on suspicion of murder. Your cab driver, who's a nut on police calls, heard it on his radio. Later on he learned somehow that you were Mac Burnett—so he phoned in where you were." The skipper looked down at the body of the dark man. "So this is Nick Pavlic, huh? Well, you did a good job, Mac. And lucky for you. If you hadn't cracked this, I'd have cracked you in the jaw for that fast one you pulled tonight. But I'll forget that now, seeing you cleaned things up so nice."

"They're cleaned up, are they?"

Maggie cut in hurriedly: "Those two in the house have been talking fast and furious. They and Nick had a racket they worked on women drunks who showed signs of having money, just like you figured out, Mac. Chuck and Gert would pick them up and turn them over to Nick. Gert has been working for a real estate firm and could get keys for apartments or houses that were unoccupied temporarily. That way the suckers would have a hard time tracing anything back. Anyway, Nick and his girl friend—one Ginny Jones—would put on a fake murder, tell the sucker she'd done it and so head off any complaints from her about losing furs, jewelry and money."

"This was no fake killing," said Burnett.

The skipper said: "We've got that figured, too. Since you pulled that hocus-pocus on me at the bureau, Mac, we've learned the dead girl was a car-hop that a guy had got in trouble. She'd told some of the girls at the drive-in that she was in trouble and she was putting the finger on the guy for dough. The way it works out is that she was pressing this Nick boy and he was probably worried about his redheaded sweetie finding out. The pair in there say the sweetie was jealous as hell and would have put a bullet in Nick for playing around. So this morning Nick got the girl over to the Angel Arms and worked her in as the corpse your client would think she'd made. Did you get anything out of him before he kicked off?"

"Not much," said Burnett.

Maggie said: "He didn't have to talk—not after the way he went to pieces when we accused him of murder. Why, if Lou French hadn't jumped him from behind, he'd have shot Mac and me."

Burnett said: "I'll admit that was nice work, Lou."

"Think nothing of it," Lou French said airily. "For Maggie I'd have jumped six guys like that. I'm just glad I snapped out of it in time."

The skipper drew Burnett off a dozen paces. He said: "Mac, I got an idea your client is connected pretty close with that nice little gal of yours. So I'll forget the client angle—unless we get in bad need of evidence from her."

"I hope you won't, skipper," said Burnett. "Thanks."

He went back to Maggie and Lou French and Lou drew a long breath, said: "Well, I guess we cleaned that one up."

Burnett said sourly but softly: "Oh, we cleaned it up, did we?"

"Mac," protested Maggie, "you don't have to talk quite so nastily to Lou after what he did tonight."

Burnett said: "What I'm getting at is that the thing isn't cleaned up. That guy, Nick, thought I was after him for an East St. Louis cop-killing. He said he didn't know a thing about a girl being bumped off at the Angel Arms. And, since the guy knew he was dying, there was no reason for him to lie."

Maggie's voice sounded shaky. "Mac, then we're back to where we were this morning. If Nita didn't do it, we don't know who could have."

"Nick thought it might have been Chuck. But I don't. I saw Chuck in action tonight and he's no killer."

"Then you do think it was Nita?"

"No. The time element doesn't agree."

"But if Nick thought it was Chuck—"

"I don't care what he thought. Chuck just hasn't got the guts."

"Oh, nuts," said Lou French impatiently. "How much guts does it take to shoot a girl in the back of the head? Not that we care now who did it. Let the cops worry."

Burnett stared at Lou French in the

semi-darkness while a lot of seconds went by. Then he said: "Lou, I think your foot just slipped."

"What do you mean?"

"How did you know the girl was shot in the back of the head?"

"You told us this afternoon."

"No," said Burnett. "No. I didn't say where she'd been shot."

"Then I must have read it in a paper or heard it on the radio."

Burnett said flatly: "Lou, you'd better remember fast just where you got the information."

Maggie glanced back and forth. "Mac, what is this?"

Lou French shrugged but his voice was uneasy. "Damned if I know what Mac's getting at but it sounds to me as though just because he doesn't like me around you, he's getting a wild hair in his imagination."

Burnett said: "Maggie, when did Lou hear Nita's story?"

"About nine this morning. I phoned him to come over right after Nita got home."

"I got the impression from what he said that he was with you from then on."

Maggie shook her head and Lou French cut in: "I left Maggie's place at ten to look for you. I got back at twelve. So what— I was roaming the town looking for you."

BURNETT said gently: "Look, hon, if my hunch about Lou is going to hit you where it hurts, I hope my hunch is wrong. But I've got to talk the hunch out." He swung a narrow-eyed stare at Lou French. "Lou, your stock line has been that you'd do anything for Maggie. Maybe that meant you'd do anything to get her. Maybe you were the guy that got this girl in trouble and you knew if she talked, you were finished with Maggie. Maybe you got into that apartment after hearing Nita's story and saw there was a chance of substituting a real murder for a fake one, a chance of getting rid of the girl with the finger of suspicion pointing everywhere except at you. So maybe you picked the girl up and took her there —or phoned and had her meet you there. And then—bingo!"

Lou French's voice stayed low but it was shaking. He said: "Mac, you're only trying to smear me in front of Maggie. You'll admit you haven't got a damn bit of proof for all this dream."

"I'll admit it," said Burnett. "But if it is true and the cops start digging, they'll find proof. If they only connect you with this girl, that's dynamite."

"You'd take this to the cops knowing what it would do to Maggie and her business to have me messed up?"

"I'll do a lot for Maggie," Burnett said wearily, "but it doesn't include covering up murder."

There was a little silence and then Lou French sighed. "Maybe you're right, Mac. With your hunch to go on, the cops could dig up a lot of facts."

Maggie said, horrified: "Lou, you mean you—you mean what Mac says is true?"

"I'm sorry, Maggie. But I'd have cooled a dozen little tramps like her to have my chance with you." Lou French stepped in close to Burnett. A gun, not very big but big enough, suddenly jumped from somewhere inside his coat and thrust against Burnett's side. "Mac, I suppose the minute I'm on my way, you'll open up to the cops."

"You're a mind reader, Lou."

"I wouldn't, Mac."

Burnett said levelly: "You think you can get away?"

"Perhaps not," said Lou French. "But if I were you, I wouldn't jump the gun with the story."

"Why not?"

Lou French said between his teeth: "Because I wouldn't want to hurt Maggie. I'd be smart. I'd wait to see first how things worked out."

Maggie said hotly: "Listen, Lou French, I wouldn't let anyone cover up murder to protect me. I'm going to tell the captain now—"

"Pipe down, Maggie," said Burnett. "How much time you want, Lou?"

"Six hours."

"You've got it."

"Thanks, Mac." The gun disappeared

into Lou French's coat. He said: "So long, Maggie. If you ever think of me, I hope you'll remember I'm the kind of a guy who'd do anything for you."

He took long strides down the alley, popped out of sight.

Maggie raised her voice. "Captain Manning!"

Captain Manning turned, came toward them.

Burnett grabbed Maggie's elbow, muttered: "Button that big and lovely mouth before your brains leak out. You told me to run this so I'm running it."

Maggie sputtered: "Why, you—you—" and Burnett overrode her sputtering with his: "Skipper, the little lady's had all she can take. How's to send her home?"

"Sure. No reason for her to hang around this slaughterhouse. Night, ma'am." The skipper tipped his hat gallantly. "Glad to have met you, ma'am."

Burnett herded Maggie down the alley toward the street.

She was still sputtering: "Mac Burnett, in six hours Lou could be so far away they'll never catch him."

"I'll take the chance."

"You know you're wrong and I'm right. You've got to do what I say, Mac."

On the fringes of the crowd that now hemmed in the alley-mouth, Burnett spied an idling taxicab. He steered Maggie to it, popped her in, saying: "Hon, are you ever going to stop trying to run everything and everybody?"

At nine o'clock in the morning Burnett got out of the Holly Towers elevator at Maggie's floor. His dark face was tired, emotion-drained, a little sullen, as he lifted the knocker on Maggie's door. Maggie opened up almost instantly. She looked tired, too, but that didn't spoil the vision she made in a flame-colored negligee.

She exploded: "Mac, I've been going crazy. The police have to know. Have you told them? Have you?"

Burnett came in, clicked the door shut. "It's too late."

"Too late?"

"The guy got away."

"Got away? Didn't I tell you? But we've got to tell the police. They can still get him."

"Not where he's gone, hon. At six-thirty, according to the coroner's office, he drove off a two-hundred-foot cliff in the Malibu and washed himself out."

"An—accident?"

Burnett shook his head, fished out a folded sheet of notepaper. "I got this special-delivery at my hotel thirty minutes ago." He unfolded the paper, read aloud: *Dear Mac— Check with the coroner and you'll see how smart you were a few hours ago to realize I'd do anything for Maggie. Lou French.*

"He—"

"Yeah," said Burnett. "The guy cleaned it all up nice for you, hon. Now the cops don't have to know anything."

"And——and you knew that was what he was going to do?"

Burnett said: "Why, sure, hon." He didn't say how many butterflies his stomach had been entertaining until thirty minutes ago, butterflies who yelled at him that his hunch about Lou French's intentions had been a bum hunch. "I knew all along I was right and you were wrong, baby. O.K.—O.K., bawl a little if you want to."

Maggie sniffled, used Burnett's handkerchief. "He—he—"

"I know. In his way, Lou wasn't such a bad guy. But not the guy for you because you overpowered him. You need somebody you can't push around."

Maggie stopped sniffling. "Meaning yourself again?"

"Why not?"

Maggie looked up at him. "I can't think of a reason why not, Mac."

After a little Maggie stepped out of Burnett's arms. She sighed. "Mac, I'm going to miss Lou—in the dress business. I don't see why you can't—"

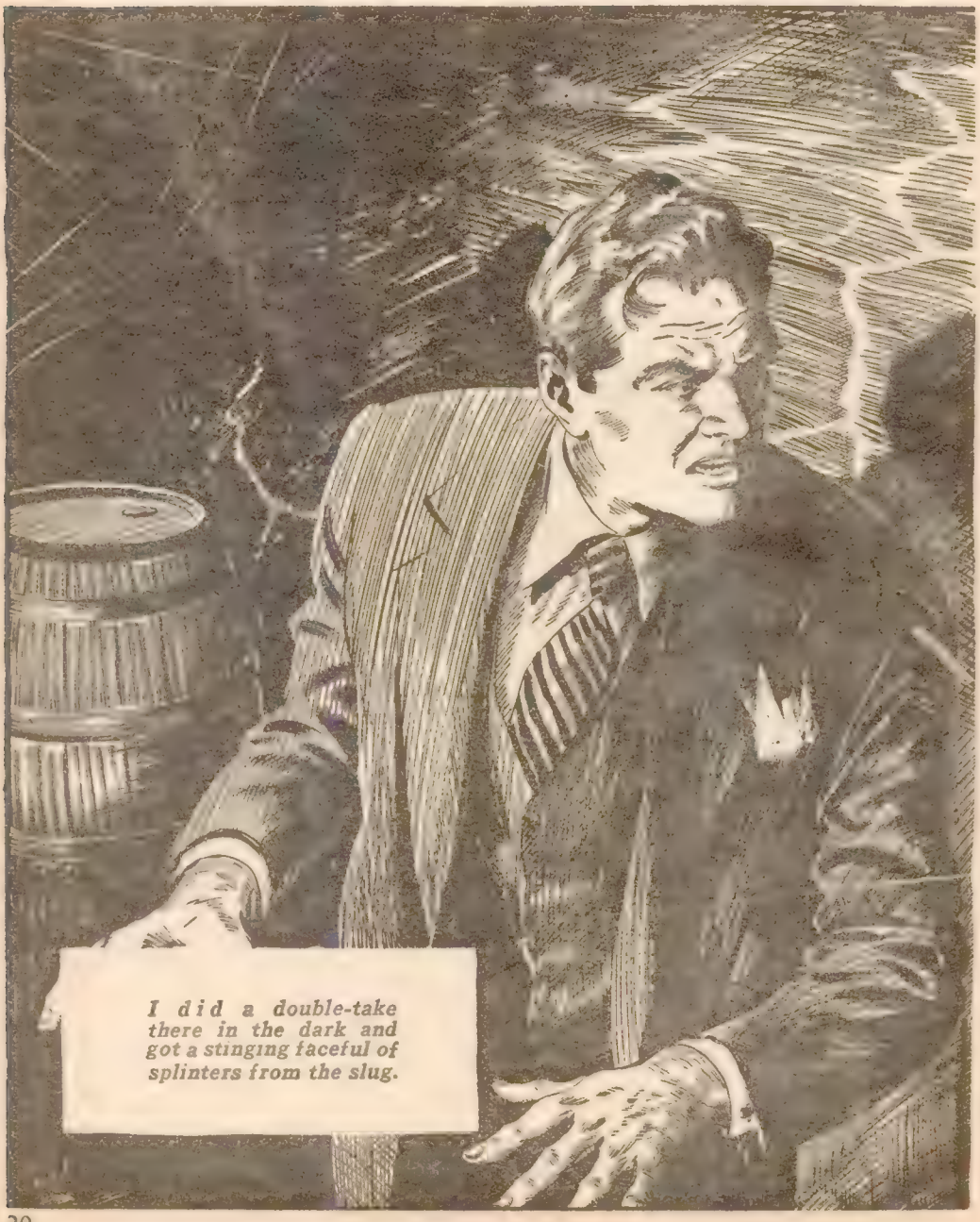
Burnett barked: "Now, look—"

"All right, all right," Maggie said hastily. "I'll forget it, Mac. I'll never mention it again."

Burnett knew she'd never mention it again. Not, at least, for a couple of weeks.

But they'd be a couple of swell weeks.

THE CORPSE WITH



GREEN HAIR

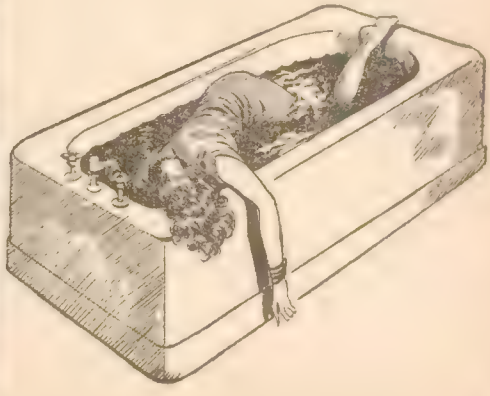
By

FERGUS TRUSLOW

Hollywood hoof-and-mouth was a common ailment among ham actors and Nick Noonan had come down with a bad case. But his estranged wife had the perfect treatment for a small bore of low caliber like Nick —a pearl-handled .25!

THIS technicolor chorus redhead, the one the others called Donna, had a .25 automatic in her hand and the light never seen on land nor sea in her eye.

"Where is he, Forbes?" She had one of those foggy, taut, cocktail-bar whispers. It was edged with a few dozen Martinis to help her recall her wrongs. "Where's that big palooka of a husband of mine, Forbes? He was in here a minute ago!"



I ran a finger around under my wilted collar. The scent of roses in vases around the library was just a little overpowering as I looked at the trembling gun in her hand. We were having Southern California earthquake weather anyway.

"Look," I said. "Please go away."

"Why?" she asked, with dangerous feminine coyness.

"Polly Ruark might pop in the door any minute."

The redhead must have seen cold sweat beading my forehead. "Why're you afraid of Ruark?" she giggled. "She's only another reporter. You oughta be 'fraida me."

"Ruark and I have an understanding. And she's the jealous type. If she catches me alone in any more libraries with any more women at any more Hollywood parties, she could torpedo Nick Noonan for me quicker than the girl bakes a cherry pie in the song."

The redhead's alcoholic stare narrowed to hard slits of agate in a flash. The muzzle of her pearl-handled .25 dead centered on my weskit. "What's a big ham actor called Nick Noonan to you?"

My abdominal wall picked out the third vest button of my tan tropicals and backed away from it, skittishly. "I'm his guide and keeper."

"I don't get it," she snapped, still agate-eyed.

"You know," I explained. "Like the goat they have in the Kansas City stockyards, to lead the cattle into the slaughter house. That's sort of like my job here in Hollywood for Atlas Studios. I take care of newcomers to the film capital for Atlas. Like I arranged this housewarming party for Noonan, see?"

"Fine housewarming!" the redhead spat. "Where the guy it's for won't acknowledge his own wife! Wait 'til I find that slice of ham! I'll. . ."

HER knuckle tightened on the trigger. Several kinds of cold chills shook me. Noonan was giving us trouble anyway. He had threatened to dive through a loophole in the option we held on him. He wavered on the very edge of going over to Axel Maag, the independent producer. Disaster hovered. And now this.

"Pardon me." I excavated wax from my ear with a wee finger. "Please repeat what you said. It sounded like you meant you were his wife. According to studio facts and figures, Nick Noonan is wifeless."

She laughed. There wasn't a *soupçon* of mirth in it.

"He's my husband." The pearl-handled .25 underlined her words with a waggle at my navel. "That ain't all. I've got his Hancock on a burleycue contract."

The moment was delicate.

"Hold everything," I whispered. Turning my back on the Martini-taut finger caressing that .25's trigger made my scalp prickle. But duty is duty.

I went to the double doors and locked them, and put the key in my jeans. Outside, the housewarming party roared through the old Hollywood mansion Atlas had leased for Noonan, like surf on a lee shore.

I took out my handkerchief. I wiped the palms of my hands and the back of my neck. In a mirror over a bookcase, a little guy with too many worry lines for his thirty years and hair going iron-gray by the minutes did likewise. I hardly recognized him. Somebody had left a stray drink sitting around within reach. I drank it at a gulp.

"You. . .You said something about a burleycue contract," I croaked.

"He signed a ten-year burleycue contract with me. When we got married that was. We had an act together, see?"

"When?"

"Six years back. The act stank after a year. So we broke it up. But the contract has four years left to run, if I should want to hold him to it. See?"

I saw. This could be worse than the trump that wrecked Jericho. The press must not get hold of it. It could bring the walls of Atlas Studios tumbling around the ears of one executive producer and six associate producers. What was more to the point, I, Lee Forbes, would be trapped in the ruins.

"Look," I said. "Maybe we could work an angle here. If you'd consider negotiating for that burleycue contract. . ."

"Negotiate nothing!" Her eyes were glassy. "I'm gonna tell every newspaper in Hollywood. . ."

I hit her. She was a lady, and she was bigger than I was, but I hit her. From the point of her jaw the impact rode up my arm to the shoulder.

The gun made a soft little thud on the library carpet. Donna didn't shut her eyes. Her green orbs just got glassier. She leaned forward into my arms, soft and warm and consenting.

I got my first whiff of the cheap, heady scent she used just as the small side library door opened behind me. With great presence of mind I toed the .25 automatic on the rug under a desk, out of sight. Not until then did I look in the big mirror over the bookcase. Polly Ruark eyed me icily in the glass.

"Hi there, Lee. Getting in a few dutiful licks for good old Atlas, I suppose?"

Polly has a nose like a bloodhound, eyes like a hawk and ears like a lynx. The strain of being pretty and petite in spite of these zoo-like traits has made her white-haired in her twenties. The white hair goes good with her cameo complexion. She dresses more like a movie starlet than a starlet does.

"You like your work well-stacked, don't you?" she added.

"Look," I began. "I can explain everything if you'll. . ."

Another one of the technicolor redheads giggled from the open door behind Polly. Somebody had imported a whole twenty-girl chorus of them from a musical we were making. The idea was to liven up Atlas's housewarming party for Noonan. They were doing it, all right. "Donna said she had hold of something big tonight," this other redhead giggled.

"She couldn't have meant Lee Forbes," Polly purred in tones matching her frosty hair. "If she did, she must have been looking at him through the bottom of a highball glass. See you around, Lee."

The door latched shut behind her.

My ears were burning. My shirt stuck to my back with cold sweat. Nick Noonan would now have to get not only himself, but me and Atlas Films out of this one. I was framing the words I'd put it to him in as I locked Donna into the library and pocketed both keys.

The housewarming party had spread all over the big house. It was ten minutes before I spotted Nick Noonan's sleek patent-leather hair in the crowd.

Axel Maag had him buttonholed. No doubt Maag was singing the siren song of more dough and a cut in an independent production.

Maag is a big, white-headed blond with a hard, nerveless, pink face. He's the kind who sneers at guys like me, who show pressure. He's also the kind who, when they open them up down at Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital, turn out to have more ulcers than Carter has pills.

"Hiya, Forbes," Maag grunted. "I'm just telling Nickie boy that if he wanted a swimming pool, he shoulda had one furnished when he flew in from New York."

"We tried to find a place with a pool, Nick." I began to sweat a little more. Noonan had expressed a loud yen for a Hollywood bathtub.

"Well, why didn't you?" Noonan's nostrils widened disdainfully as he gazed around the room. He shrugged broad, well-padded shoulders. "This old shack must have been here since the days of the dons. And no pool."

"We're in the grip of a swimming pool shortage out here on the coast, Nick. Like the housing shortage, you know."

I fished a stogie out of my pocket and clipped the end off with my knife. I was tempted to pare Noonan down to size, too. "We'll take care of that swimming pool for you when shortages begin to ease up a little."

Axel Maag rubbed his glittering manicure job on a blue flannel sports coat with crested silver buttons. He admired the sheen of his nails. "It's already taken care of."

"What do you mean?" I felt a goose walk over my grave.

"Come and see for yourself." Maag led us out through open French doors to the terrace.

One of those listless, dry-hot earthquake nights held the huge old garden in a trance. The stench of jasmine was enough to choke you.

"While Forbes was busy draggin' you around handshaking, I got the pool for you." Maag waved glittering fingernails like a magician making a pass. "There it is, Nick."

And there it was. Out there where only lawn had been yesterday, blue starlight made a mirror of a big swimming pool.

"It can't be!" he gulped. "Why, it's impossible! It would take six months. . . I mean no contractor in the town could possibly . . ."

But there it was. Nick Noonan looked at it like a kid gazing at his first Christmas tree. You could see it was the coming-true of an old, long-held dream. Lots of them are like that when they arrive in Hollywood.

"Thanks, Maag," he said huskily. He started forward, like he meant to dive in clothes and all. I grabbed his sleeve. "Wait," I said.

He struck my hand aside with dignity. "I'm afraid, Forbes," he sneered, "that you and I—that is, Atlas—can't do business. Better have your lawyers see my lawyers tomorrow. Maag says there's holes in that option."

I didn't plunge my penknife into his throat. I only folded the blade and put it back in my pocket. "Before you make any hasty decisions," I hinted, "you'd better step into the library. There's an angle you may have overlooked."

He got the edge I put on the words. He nodded.

I LED him into the house. Donna Noonan, who'd been a redheaded bolt from the blue a few minutes ago, was now my hole card.

Only she was gone. The library chair I'd propped her up in was empty. Both doors were still locked. A window stood open to the listless, dry breeze. Her pearl-handled .25 was gone off the rug under the desk, too.

"Well, Forbes?" Nick Noonan slid both hands into his side pockets. He faced me haughtily, like a young aristocrat staring down a blackmailing butler.

I wiped my palms and the back of my neck. Earthquake weather always makes me sweat.

"Ever been married, Nick?" I shot it at him through acrid stogie smoke.

He flinched as if I'd thrust a red-hot poker in his face. "No," he snapped.

A vertical furrow showed between his handsome black brows.

"You're sure you've never donned the matrimonial manacles?"

He wasn't admitting it if he had. He stalked to the door with dignity. "If that's all you've got to say, Forbes, let's make this good-bye. A permanent good-bye. My lawyers will see you about buying back my option. I'm going over to Maag."

Numbly I followed him back out to that swimming pool Maag had built overnight.

It still seemed impossible. Maag had had a few bushel baskets of gardenias dumped into the water. The floating flowers made a sickish-sweet patchwork spread on top. In the dark there was lots of splashing and squealing going on. Some of the party guests had gone in with their clothes on. But most had changed to the swim suits Maag had provided. I didn't spot Donna Noonan among the technicolor redheads fleeing from the splashing sound around the pool like dolls made of sugar.

At the bar Atlas had paid to have set up in the dining room, I collapsed on an empty stool. Ruin stared me in the face. That's why I didn't see Polly Ruark on the next stool.

"Better give Mr. Forbes his usual," she told the barman. "He's a badly shaken man. He's just seen a swimming pool pulled out of a hat, like a rabbit."

At my nod, the bald barkeep poured me a double rye, straight, set out the aspirin bottle. He conjured up a cup of coffee, black and smoking hot.

"Some things about this town never change." Polly smiled at the barman as if he were an old crony of hers, which he was. She ignored me. "You take this Nick Noonan person."

The barman mopped the mahogany and finished off by making a pass at his bald pate with the bar rag. "What about him?"

"He's coming down with Hollywood hoof-and-mouth," Polly said. "The big head. Like they all get. Remember that last film luminary who infested this old place?"

She mentioned his name. It was only a name to me. I remembered the guy vaguely, if at all.

"*Do* I?" the barman grunted. "He had alcoholic delusions even in front of a camera. They used to write his scripts around his attacks of delirium tremens."

"That's not the half of it," Polly said sweetly. "He had hydrophobia."

The bartender breathed fog into a glass and polished it out with a towel. "You mean he went around biting people? I knew a guy once. . ."

"Not that kind of hydrophobia. I mean, the psychological term—fear of water. And I mean fear. When Saturday night rolled around he just took an alcohol rub. Honest, some people are just that afraid of things. Some people can't look off a tall building without going to pieces. This lad we speak of just naturally couldn't look at water, or stand the feel of it."

"His alcohol rubs," the bartender offered, "musta been mostly internal. They say he used to have a bottle hoist from his cellar to his bedside. They loaded it up for him like a battlewagon's ammunition hoist, every night. Say, whatever happened to him?"

Polly still kept her cameo face turned away from me. "Last I heard," she purred, "the lad in question was playing tick-tack-toe on the walls of a padded cell. He went nuts when they put him in a sea picture. He couldn't even stand to look at a bird bath. A whole ocean of water drove him really nutty."

She snickered for my benefit. By this time I could have used a padded cell myself. But I didn't lie on the floor and kick and scream. I just pushed my glass at the barman and wiggled my eyebrows. He obliged.

One o'clock in the A. M. found me alone and brooding on the wide sweep of the front stairs. I'd put in most of the eve trying to find Donna Noonan among the technicolor redheads smooching on the back stairs or passed out in the parlor. Only she could help me bring Nick Noonan back to heel.

FAILURE tears a man down physically. I was just finishing the drink I carried when my ticker began to act up on me. *Tap, tappy, tappy tap!* It hit an off-beat syncopation. I grabbed for my pulse. Waves of dizziness swept over me. It was funny. The steady throb in my wrist wasn't keeping time with the pulse in my ears.

At the precise point, something cold and wet seeped through the seat of my tan tropicals. I rose with studied dignity. You never know, in Hollywood. Anything for a gag. Water had sneaked down the stairs behind me, a step at a time. *Tap, tappy, tappity, tappity, tap!*

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MUTUAL BROADCASTING SYSTEM, INC.

I went upstairs to see what gave. After all, I had nothing else to do. And I was the official host and caretaker around here.

My feet made squshy noises on the carpet in the upper hall. The squshing sounded loudest outside the door of the bathroom connecting Nick's master bedroom with my quarters. I opened the bathroom door. When I flipped on the light switch, my heart really did play tricks. It climbed into my throat, gave a couple of flops, and quit.

Donna Noonan had vanished into something wetter than thin air. She'd gone swimming in a full tub of water with her clothes on.

Maybe she'd gotten cramps. Anyway, she lay face down in the brimming tub, with her long red hair hanging over the side.

That is, it had been red. Where the hot breeze through the window had dried it, it was turning green. A nice, metallic dull green.

I turned off the stream of droning cold water and went to get Nick Noonan.

Noonan's sneer paled out like stars fading in the dawn when I grabbed a handful of that green hair and lifted her staring face out of the water for him to see.

"Your wife?" I asked.

It was like I'd hit him in the belly. He whooshed.

"Well, is she or isn't she the wife you tried to forget you had?"

The way he looked around the walls of the bathroom might have been closing in on him. "Y—yes. My God! It's Donna!"

"Didn't she have you sewed up in some kind of a long-term burleycue contract you'd forgotten about, too?"

He groaned aloud. Even in defeat he was glorious. Gloriously a ham. The groan came out baritone and something fit to wring tears from a matinee audience.

I let his long-lost frau's face sink back into the tub. I kept her hair out of the water. I wanted it to stay dry and green.

Nick Noonan looked into the tub and shuddered.

"We've got to get her out of here," I mused. "It looks bad for me. I've been seen playing rough with her down in the library this evening. And here she is parked in the bathroom between your bedroom and mine."

"Looks bad for *you!*" he gulped. "Think of me! She's my wife! The newspapers. . . ."

"Not so good," I admitted. "But what do we do now?"

"The back stairs! We might take her down the back stairs and . . ."

I nixed it. "Those back stairs have been a lover's lane since the first cork of the evening was popped. You can't carry her down the front stairs, either. She might drip on some representative of the press."

We observed a moment of silence. The sweetish odor of jasmine drifted in the bathroom window.

"I'll take her off your hands for a consideration," I said, at last.

"What's the consideration?"

"From this day forth you belong to Atlas Studios, body and soul. Or else."

The vertical groove sneaked back between his eyebrows. "It's blackmail."

I glanced significantly at the body in the tub. Noonan's eyes followed mine. He ran a worried hand over the patent-leather sheen of his hair. "It's a deal."

"O. K. She's my baby," I agreed. "You go back down stairs. Brace yourself with a little brandy. But not too much. You'll need your wits before the night's over. And I need half an hour to get this wife of yours out of here."

He left, looking a little seasick.

I felt a little *mal-de-mer* myself as I hurriedly explored the big master bedroom. It was a high-ceilinged stash big enough to stable a squadron of cavalry. I started around the walls, tapping like they do in a spy picture, looking for secret panels and such.

I'd forgotten one thing in my hurry. To lock the bathroom door. A woman's ringing scream out in the hall reminded me. It curdled my blood, too.

"It's Donna!" a woman yodeled. "She's done it! She's dead!"

"Shut up!" a man's voice snarled.

"There's somebody in that bedroom! I heard him lock the door!"

I cursed the stiff lock I'd just turned. By the time I'd secured the hall door a mob had begun to gather. The squshing of excited feet out there sounded like a herd of water buffalo.

That boozy party crowd could be the next thing to a lynch mob if they caught me in here now. So my means of exit just about had to be here.

IT WAS. I found the bottle-hoist in the biggest closet about the time they began to batter the bedroom door open. It was just an old-fashioned dumbwaiter. It ran on ropes, behind a cupboard door in the closet.

I climbed in. With my knees up under my chin, I could make it. For once I was happy about not being a big guy.

The dumbwaiter smelt musty, dusty and disused. A good tug on the pull-ropes started me down toward the basement. I kept tugging until I hit bottom. Another cupboard door let me out.

It was pitch dark down there. A sour, musty, stale smell of vino told me where I was. I fumbled across the vine-cellar toward a yellow crack of light under a door. The doorknob rattled when my hand found it.

That was a mistake. At the rattle of the knob somebody out in the basement hall downed a mop in a tin pail. I heard the handle hit a wall. And then I got a stinging faceful of splinters.

Crack. A new, round dot of yellow light bloomed in the door.

I let go of the doorknob as if it were red hot. I did a double take there in the dark with nobody to see and laugh. "Hey!" I said. "What's the idea of. . ."

Crack. Another little round yellow hole sprayed me with splinters.

I hit the dirt. The cement floor, that is. Outside, somebody heard me flop. The next slug drilled through that door low down, within six inches of the floor. It creased my scalp close enough to feel like a hot poker.

The next round would do it. I couldn't move. I just lay there and waited for it.

Two or three minutes moved glacially past into eternity. And then I realized shoeleather had whispered, faded, gone away. After twenty minutes, I got up enough nerve to force the door open.

The pail and the mop and the guy with the gun had gone. The hall had a faint, haunting odor of burnt nitro that told me it hadn't been just a bad dream. The holes in the door were there where splinters had been knocked loose.

Upstairs, the whole party mob was surging around on the stairs, in the hall, and in the big master bedroom. I muscled into the crowd with a whiskey-soda in one fist as the cops arrived.

Axel Maag had everybody shoved out of the bathroom where Donna Noonan floated in the full tub. Nick Noonan, pale around his handsome gills, was there. I wedged myself beside him, after I was through in the bedroom.

Polly Ruark's eyes were gleaming with excitement in her pretty cameo face. "Let's see you dig yourself out from under this little load of grief, Mr. Forbes!" she whispered. "I just want to see how a master tactician like you works when his back is to the wall!"

Two pairs of prowlies from the Valley Division pushed through the crowd outside the bathroom door. "Page the homicide squad, Jim." Maag growled at the man with the sergeant's chevrons. The gray-headed sergeant took a long, unsurprised look at Donna Noonan. Somebody had pulled her head out of the water. Her hair was drying fast. It was drying to a dull, metallic green, all over.

"Who is she?" He opened his book.

Maag rubbed glittering pink nails on the blue flannel jacket with crested silver buttons and admired the result. "Ask Lee Forbes. Atlas Studios is throwing this melee. Not me."

"Her name was Mrs. Nick Noonan," I said, in reply to the cop's grim look.

Everybody swung around on Nick Noonan. The Broadway actor winced and went ashen under the battery of stares. He threw me the look of a man going down the third time.

"Anybody know how she got herself drowned in this tub *with her clothes on?*" The sergeant plainly thought this was

one time having your clothes on at a Hollywood party was strictly scandalous.

"Ask Maag," I suggested. "He drowned her."

"I beg your pardon?" Maag said.

"I said, you drowned her."

Everybody looked at Maag, now. The crickets outside in the garden sounded louder, suddenly. The smell of jasmine almost choked me, the way it came through the open bathroom window.

You had to hand it to Maag. His Great Stone Face act was tops. "Malarky," he said calmly. "Why would I do anything so eccentric as to go around drowning people's wives?"

"You drowned Noonan's wife because you thought you had Noonan sewed up in a profitable deal. Then she came along with the news she had a previous contract. She must have crashed out of the library where I'd left her and gone straight out to the pool. She ran into you, while she was looking for Nick. You learned she had an old burleycue contract. She was mad enough to hold Nick to it. You saw a couple of hundred grand going glimmering. So you dunked Donna to shut her mouth and cancel that old burleycue contract."

Maag's grin looked a little brittle around the edges. "Sure. I dragged her screaming up the stairs by the hair. I filled the bathtub with water and. . ."

"You didn't do it that way," I cut in. "You were down by the pool when Donna came looking for Nick. You just pushed Donna into the pool and went in with her, to make sure she didn't come up."

"Weren't there any other people around that pool?" the police sergeant snapped.

"Sure," I admitted. "But lots of them were screaming and yelling and going in with their clothes on. Another yell or two wouldn't be noticed. There wasn't any light to speak of. Maag just took her under and held her. Until he was good and sure she couldn't come up to sniff the gardenias floating on the water. He probably wedged her body under the foot of the steel ladder in the corner of the pool. Later he could come back and get her and bring her up here to make it look like maybe I had knocked her off."

"How'd he. . . how would anybody get her past witnesses in the house or on the stairs?" The police sergeant scratched his scalp audibly.

One of the younger flatties had been prowling in the master bedroom. He had the answer to that one. "Here you are," he put in importantly. "Get a load of this. There's a big dumbwaiter in a closet in that bedroom. We found this in it, see."

He held out a big, grubby hand. A crested silver button caught the light. It matched the buttons on Maag's sleeve.

"Maag moved her body up in that dumbwaiter." The young cop was hot on the trail now. "We found it in the closet easy, account of the trail of drip and puddles he left getting her across the floor to the bathroom."

"No. I. . .there couldn't be," Maag mumbled, half to himself. "I mopped up after I. . ."

His breath sucked back in his throat in a sick whistle as he tried to swallow his own words too late.

The gray-headed sergeant let his mouth fall open. He was looking right at the biggest pinch of his life. It paralyzed him.

Maag backed up one step and reached for his hip pocket. "Look out!" I yipped. "He's loaded!"

The youngest cop smacked him across the neck with his sap. Maag grunted like a big blond water buffalo. He went to his knees, blinking.

All four cops dived in, eager to be first with the bracelets.

The gray old sergeant won. He sighed satisfaction, mopped his face and put his cap straight. "You're under arrest," he said mechanically.

HIS EYES came back to me. "How'd you know he done it in the swimming pool?"

"Mr. Nick Noonan," I said, putting it carefully in the words I wanted to see in the press releases tomorrow, "found his dear wife's body. In spite of the great shock to him, he nerved himself to run

the murderer to death. He told me his deductions, and left the unmasking of the slayer to me."

Polly Ruark was making her own private brand of hentracks in a notebook. "Go on, Lee," she said dryly. "This is a great—a truly great—news story. Now tell us how Nick Noonan knew she'd been drowned in the swimming pool and the body planted up here in the tub to throw suspicion on you, or on Noonan himself."

"The green hair," I said.

Everybody looked avidly at Donna Noonan's body, still in the tub. "You see," I went on, "Maag overlooked something he should have known, being in flickers himself. Donna Noonan's hair had been dyed red for her job in the chorus of a technicolor musical. If Maag had noticed how the other redheads of the chorus shunned his nice new pool like poison, he'd have tumbled. Technicolor red hair has a special bleach and dye combined. The slightest contact with chlorine in swimming pools works a chemical change in a hurry. It turns that kind of red hair a nice metallic green as fast as it dries."

The rest is history if you read the papers. Except that I cornered Nick Noonan in the library before the cops had gone. That was off the record. After one or two twists of the thumbscrews he volunteered to sign a simple little contract I whipped up on the library typewriter.

When I'd blotted the shaky signature he put to it, he was a slave and chattel of Atlas Films for the term of his natural life. And even after death, if Atlas wanted to waste any footage on him.

"How did you really know it was Maag and not me?" Noonan's handsome sneer was only the ghost of itself now.

"Because," I told him, "Maag knew where the body was buried. That is, where the swimming pool was buried."

"Swimming pool? Buried? I don't get it."

"It's easy. You see, one of the last guys to infest this old manse had hydrophobia. Psychologically speaking, I mean. He couldn't stand water, to look at or to drink. So he had the swimming pool that came with this place when he bought it, sodded over."

"You mean there was an old swimming pool filled in with dirt and grass planted?"

"Yep. Maag knew about it. That's how he produced a 'new' pool on such short notice. He had it cleaned out and filled. If Maag knew about the pool, he must have known the place and its history well enough to know where the dumbwaiter from the wine cellar could be found, too. That's how he managed to get Donna's body upstairs through the house without being seen."

"How did you know Maag had her gun?"

"He took a couple of shots at me through a door in the basement when I barged in at the wrong time. Maag had left the mopping up in the basement to the last. I walked into the picture in time to just miss soaking up a couple of .25 slugs."

At this point Polly Ruark barged into the library with her notebook poised.

"Maag," she announced, "is still upstairs with the cops. He insists he mopped up those puddles in the bedroom and around the dumbwaiter in the closet. He can't figure where new puddles could have come from. Would you care to make any statement for the press about what you did with the Scotch-and-soda I saw in your hand just before the cops arrived?"

"No," I said.

"And isn't it a coincidence," she went on sweetly, "that one of Mr. Maag's silver sleeve buttons was found in the dumbwaiter? I looked at the threads on it. They were cut. You wouldn't have brushed against Mr. Maag in the crowd before the cops. . ."

"You will kindly shut your pretty little mouth?" I said, snipping the end off a stogie with my penknife, and scowling.

Polly Ruark winked at me like a white-headed pixie. It make me think of the birds, and the bees, and the flowers.

Back in New England, when Americans wore pilgrim hats and big-buckled shoes, she'd have been burnt for a witch.

HANGING IS TOO GOOD

When Lee Fiske was offered half a C just to bring home a band-struck bobby-soxer, he almost grew muscle-bound patting himself on the back. What he forgot was that swing music goes well at a gallows party, too.

By ROBERT MARTIN

A RICH widow named Mrs. Noah Hopkins hired me to go to South Crossing, Ohio, to convince her wayward daughter that all was forgiven and to come home to mamma. The daughter, who bore the Frenchy name of Louette, was an only child, and it seemed as though when she was sixteen-and-a-half years old she skipped town with a roving trumpet player named Johnny Wingate. The police didn't locate her for a year. By that time the trumpet player had left her, and she was working in a frosted malted and rootbeer stand outside of Saginaw. She was still under age, so the cops brought her home. They never did catch Johnny Wingate.

But after they got her home I gathered that mamma wouldn't let her for-

Louette stood with her back to the wall as Dick swung out hard against Dorn's chin.

get what a bad girl she had been, so pretty soon, when Louette was eighteen, she skipped out again.

A year went by, and then Mrs. Hopkins heard from Louette. She wanted to come home. But by that time mamma had developed a she-made-her-bed complex, and she didn't answer the letter or the two that followed. And then mamma had a heart attack. The doctors gave her six months to live, and mamma decided after all that she wanted to see her baby girl again before she died. So she changed her will and gave all her money and bonds and apartment houses to Louette—provided that Louette would come home and sit by her bedside during her last days. But by that time Louette didn't want to come home —not ever, for any reason—and the lawyers mamma sent to South Crossing couldn't budge her.

So Mrs. Hopkins hired me to bring Louette home. She had read a few books and seen some movies and she was convinced that private detectives were good at things like that. I didn't disillusion her—especially since she offered me five hundred dollars above my regular rate for her daughter, C.O.D. I acted like a private detective and said, sure, leave it to me, and I went to South Crossing.

IT WAS a medium-sized town at the edge of the foothills a hundred and twenty-five miles southeast of Toledo. The first thing I did was go to the local police station. They had a modern little lay-out, with two-way radios in their three Ford cruisers, a miniature fingerprint department, and a genial, spry, gum-chewing chief with a hearing aid apparatus plugged into his left ear. The chief treated me fine and said, you bet, Louette Hopkins is a mighty fine girl—the only thing they had on the record against her was an over-time parking ticket. He told me she was working for the Dorn Trucking Company and gave me directions to get there.

Ten minutes later I parked my Ford beside a long brick building near the state highway at the edge of town. The building was on the edge of a two-acre black-topped area filled with parked tractor and trailer outfits. At the far side was a string of hangar-like buildings filled with trucks being repaired and serviced. I walked along the brick building and looked through wide steel-framed windows at half a dozen persons working at desks. A sign over a door at the end read: *Dorn Trucking Company.* I went in.

A tall, lean man with blue eyes, sharp cheek bones and short bristly red hair was standing behind a desk. He was wearing gray flannel slacks and a white shirt open at the neck with the blunt ends of a blue-speckled bow tie hanging loose across his chest. He had a bottle of coke in one hand, and a fifth of whiskey in the other. From a room behind him I could hear the sound of a typewriter, and the clatter of other typewriters came dimly through a closed door on my left.

The redheaded man said: "I don't want any."

"I'm not selling anything. Are you Mr. Dorn?"

He nodded, and took a swallow of whiskey He followed it with a swallow of coke.

"Does Miss Louette Hopkins work here?"

He nodded again. Then he grinned suddenly and held the bottle out to me. "You look like a right guy," he said. "Have a drink?"

"No, thanks. Could I speak to Miss Hopkins for a few minutes?"

He held the whiskey bottle up to the light and squinted at it. It was a little over half full. "A little hair of the poodle," he said. "Only I think it was a Great Dane that bit me last night . . . This is Miss Hopkins' busy day. Is it important?"

I flipped open my wallet and showed him my license. He leaned forward and peered at it. "Did she murder somebody?" he asked.

I put the wallet back in my pocket. I didn't say anything.

He waved the bottle towards the door behind his desk. "You can't have her," he said. "She's the best girl I ever had—

and good secretaries are hard to find. Before I got her, I even had my wife working for me—but her typing looked like chicken tracks."

"That's tough," I said. "O.K. if I talk to her?"

He waved the bottle again. "Sure. Go ahead. But it won't do you any good. You're the third guy her old lady has sent down here."

"I know," I said, "but I'm getting paid to ask her." I moved around his desk and opened the door beyond.

A medium-sized girl turned away from a typewriter and looked at me. She had shoulder-length black hair, parted on the side and combed straight across her forehead, a narrow pointed face, firm cheek bones, smooth black brows, large eyes the color of good tobacco, a short, thin nose, a full red mouth.

I took off my hat. "Miss Hopkins?"

"Yes." Her voice was cool and her eyes were cool.

"My name's Fiske, Miss Hopkins. Your mother—"

"No," she broke in.

"You don't want to go home?"

She shook her head slowly and turned back to her typewriter. "Not ever," she said in a low voice. Her face was averted, and her fingers were poised over the keys. She was waiting for me to go away.

I didn't want to go away. I had expected to maybe find a brassy babe with red shoes and bleached hair, but Louette Hopkins looked like a nice high school girl from down the street with two brothers on the football team. And I was thinking of that nice five hundred bonus.

"I'd like to talk to you a little more about it," I said. "Can I see you—when you're through here?"

She didn't look at me. "There's nothing to talk about. Please go away."

"She needs you," I said. "She—"

She swung toward me, and her lips were trembling a little. "I needed her once, too," she said. "I needed her very badly. And she—she . . ."

"I know," I said. "But she's old and she's sick and she's changed her will. She wanted me to tell you that. If you come home, everything will go to you. She—"

Louette Hopkins stood up so suddenly that I jumped. She faced me, and her eyes were hot with tears. "No, no, no," she said. She turned abruptly away and opened a door at the side of the room. The door slammed behind her. I sighed and moved back into the outer office.

THE redheaded man had his feet on the desk and was drinking from the whiskey bottle. The coke bottle was empty. A big beefy kid came in from outside. He was carrying a leather mail pouch. I say "kid," but I couldn't tell how old he was. He could have been sixteen or thirty. He had a soft white face, a long nose and a loose mouth. Muddy colored hair was slicked down over his big skull, and his eyes were pale gray and too far apart. He was about six foot one or two, and I guessed him to weigh around two hundred pounds. He was wearing dirty cot-

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ton slacks, heavy, thick-soled shoes, a too-tight plaid sport jacket. A pink open-necked shirt exposed damp hair at the base of his thick white neck.

He gave me a dull stare, said to the redheaded man: "Hi, Mr. Dorn," and shuffled across the room to the door of Louette Hopkins' office. I heard her come back from wherever she had been, and the kid said in a loud voice: "Here's the mail, beautiful. Whatcha doing tonight?"

"Go away, Lester. I'm busy." Louette Hopkins sounded annoyed.

"Aw, now, baby. When you gonna go out with me?"

He didn't get an answer, and presently the kid came back out, chuckling to himself. He headed for the door, still chuckling.

Dorn's voice stopped him. "Lester."

The kid turned, looked blankly at me again, and said: "Yes, Mr. Dorn?"

"Go down to the printers and pick up those letter-heads. Then help Jim load that shipment for Zanesville."

The kid didn't answer him. He was still looking at me. His eyes held a peculiar vacant expression.

Dorn said: "Did you get that, Lester?"

Lester turned his head slowly, his mouth open. "What?"

Dorn repeated his instructions. Then he winked at me and said: "What's the matter. Got your girls on your mind?"

Lester chuckled, and his eyes took on a glimmer of expression. "I got me a club, Mr. Dorn," he said. "To keep 'em off me."

Dorn said: "That's the stuff. Now get going."

The kid chuckled again, and went out.

Dorn shook his head and said to me. "That's Lester. Office boy, great lover, and general handy man."

"You better keep a straight jacket handy," I said.

He laughed. "Lester's all right. He's the son of one of my oldest mechanics. He asked me to give Lester a job so that he could keep an eye on him. He's strong as a bull, and he'll do anything I ask him to."

I moved toward the door. "Thanks," I said, "for letting me talk to your secretary."

He smiled suddenly. "I know you now—been trying to think ever since I saw your private detective's license. Lee Fiske—you nabbed that guy who strangled the school teacher in Toledo last year. Saw your picture in the paper. You cornered him in a hay mow, and he damn near got you with a shotgun. Isn't that right?"

I nodded. "He wasn't a very good shot."

Dorn jerked his head toward Louette Hopkins' door. "Any luck in there?"

I shook my head. "Not yet."

He handed me the bottle. "Too bad. Have a drink."

It was one hundred proof bonded bourbon, and it slid down my throat like milk. I handed the bottle back to him.

He said: "You all through—with her, I mean?"

I shrugged. "For now. I'm going to try to see her again."

He lit a cigarette and hunched his wide shoulders over his desk. "It won't do you any good. How about working for me?"

I grinned. "Driving a truck?"

He laughed shortly and without humor. "You're husky enough. I was thinking of availing myself of your professional services."

"Trouble?"

"Why in hell do you think I'm drinking in the afternoon?" He shoved the bottle toward me. "Of course it's trouble." He turned to look out the window. "Private detective. That's what I need. I just realized it."

I lifted the bottle and drank. "Everybody has trouble," I said.

"You'll work for me?"

"That depends."

He turned to look at me. "Choosey, huh?"

"I have to be."

He crushed out his cigarette and turned to stare out the window again. "All I know about you fellows is what I see in the movies. How is it, really?"

"Pretty dull, most of the time."

"No shots in the night?" he said mockingly. "No daggers and blood and corpses in the library?"

I was beginning to like the bourbon. I took another swallow, and I didn't say anything.

He swung around in his chair. "Don't mind me, Fiske. I'm really serious. It's just that it seems as though somebody else is sitting here in my chair talking about hiring a detective—I can't make myself believe that it's me, Bill Dorn." He hesitated, and he looked down at his big boney hands. "How about a simple little job like—oh, say like catching a cheating wife?"

"Whose wife?"

"Mine," he said quietly.

THE typewriter in the office beyond Dorn's desk made a faint monotonous pecking sound. It reminded me of when I was a kid practicing on the piano with *The American Boy* propped on the music rack and my fingers just banging away on the keys to fool my mother in the next room. I hadn't fooled my mother and Louette Hopkins wasn't fooling me. She was hitting one key, over and over, just to make a noise.

"I'm sorry," I said to Dorn.

He held up a hand, and there was a tight look around his mouth. "Don't be. It's probably my own damn fault. Maybe I've been too busy building up this outfit from two pick-ups and a bicycle. Anyhow, I think she's got some guy on the string. I don't know who—and I don't want to know. I just want you to follow her around, get the goods on her, and my lawyer can do the rest." He sighed, and looked at his hands again.

"It's out of my line," I said.

"Don't get coy, Fiske. Name your price—I'll pay it."

I stood up. "I already have one job in this town."

He turned to look out the window, and his mouth twitched a little. I was suddenly sorry for him. I said: "How do you know this—about your wife?"

He spoke without turning around. "For one thing I keep getting notes in the mail. Nasty little notes. *Your wife is chasing around with another man. Get wise, sucker.* Stuff like that. I laughed them off at first, but they kept coming. I even showed them to Janet. She laughed, too. But then she began going out nights and not telling me where. I asked her once and she told me that she had been at a friend's house. I checked—she hadn't been there. That's when I began to sweat."

"Did you ever follow her?"

"Do I have to go into details?" he asked harshly. "No, I never followed her. I couldn't do that—I don't know how you fellows work, but do what you have to do and get it over with."

The typewriter beyond the wall went *peck, peck, peck.*

I said: "There are plenty of boys who specialize in that sort of thing—with their little flash cameras. I suppose that's what you want. A nasty way to make a living, I admit, but I can give you the name of a reliable man. It'll cost you twenty dollars a day at least and expenses."

He swung around and hit the desk with a fist. His face was flushed with the whiskey, but his eyes were steady and cold. "I don't want any two-bit snooper and his damned camera. I want you. You look like a right guy, and I think you'll play it straight. I want a fast, clean job, and I'm willing to pay anything you ask."

A telephone jangled in the adjoining office, and through the thin walls I heard the murmur of Louette Hopkins's voice. Then a buzzer let loose beside Dorn's desk, and he picked up the telephone at his elbow. "Yes," he said. "Yes, Janet, I'll be home for dinner." He raised troubled eyes to me and spoke into the mouthpiece. "Look, I'm bringing a guest. A Mr. Fiske, from—from Milwaukee . . . Yes, he's in the office now. O.K.? . . . Goodbye." He hung up and looked at me with grim humor in his eyes. "My wife wants you for dinner," he said.

"Sorry," I told him, "but Mr. Fiske from Milwaukee was called out of town—suddenly. Mr. Fiske sends his regrets."

"Dammit," he said. "Don't be so stub-

born. You can at least come to dinner, can't you?" He glanced at a gold wrist watch. "It's almost five. Louette will lock up. Let's go." He stood up. "Maybe if you meet her . . . ?"

"My business is with Louette," I said. "I'll send you a man when I get back to Toledo."

He placed both his hands on the desk and leaned toward me. "Look, Fiske, you haven't got a chance of talking Lou into going back to that mother of hers. She's told me all about it and I know Lou. She won't give in."

"I still get fifty a day for trying," I said.

He waved a hand impatiently. "All right. I'll make a deal. I hate to lose her, but I'll talk her into going home—if you'll do that job for me."

He sounded as though he knew what he was talking about, and I thought of the five hundred bonus for bringing Louette home to mamma. I said: "What if I find out that your wife is really on the level?"

He looked at me steadily. "I can't hope for that, Fiske."

I shrugged. "All right. It's a deal."

He held out a hand. "Fine. I'll talk to Lou tomorrow. She'll listen to me. I've been a kind of a combination boss and big brother to her ever since I hired her. Can she work until the end of the week—until I get a new girl?"

I nodded. "The old lady has waited four years—she can wait a week longer." I paused. "There's one thing more."

"Yes?" There was a sudden alert look in his eyes.

"You aren't framing your wife, are you?"

"Certainly not," he said coldly.

I stood up and moved to the door. "All right. I'll do what I can."

He put on a gray herring-bone coat and opened the door to Louette Hopkins' office. "I'm leaving, Lou. Lock up, will you?"

I heard her say: "All right, Bill. I'll leave my keys with the night dispatcher."

"Why?" he asked blankly.

"I—I'm quitting, Bill. Tonight."

CHAPTER TWO

Come to Mamma

DORN shot a quick glance at me over his shoulder. Then he jerked his head silently and moved into the girl's office. I followed him. Louette Hopkins faced us, her hands folded quietly in her lap.

Dorn forced a laugh. "You're kidding, Lou."

She shook her head slowly. "I mean it, Bill. I'm going away."

I said: "Miss, you can't hide from anybody, anywhere."

She gave me a faint smile.

Dorn said: "We'll talk it over tomorrow."

"No," she said. "I won't be here tomorrow."

Dorn moved close to her. "Now, look, Lou. Don't do anything foolish. You're upset . . ."

I turned, crosesd the outer office, and stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight. I lit a cigarette and waited for Dorn. In about five minutes he came out and stood beside me.

"She'll be all right tomorrow," he said. "She's had spells like this before. Poor kid—it's not right for a girl to be so bitter against her own mother." He reached into an inside coat pocket and took out a pigskin wallet. "How about an advance?"

I held up a hand. "Don't rush me. If she doesn't run out on you, O.K. This deal works both ways."

He laughed shortly and moved toward a tan Chrysler convertible parked beside the building. "Still not sold, huh? Come on. Maybe a couple of martinis will help."

A stub-nose Diesel tractor pulling a huge stainless steel tandem wheeled around the building and hissed to a stop. The driver leaned his head out of the high cab and shouted at Dorn: "Hey, Boss, the wife's due for a baby. O.K. if I dead-head back from Columbus?"

"Dead-head, hell," Dorn said. "That tractor don't roll without a load behind."

The driver grinned and gunned his motor. "How about a load of beer sometime? When you gonna let me haul beer, Boss?"

"Get rolling for Columbus," Dorn said, "or I'll put you on the grocery route."

"Swell," the driver said. "Maybe I'll eat then." He threw back his head, laughed loudly, and wheeled the big outfit out to the highway.

"Slave driver," I said to Dorn.

He grinned a little. "'Wife having a baby,'" he said mockingly. "Hell, Jim's not even married. Truck drivers are a queer crew."

"You seem to get along with them."

"I used to drive the big jobs myself," he said. "It's like liquor, or a woman, or gambling—it gets in your blood. Even now, when we're short-handed, I take a load out. There's something about the road, and the lights, and the smell of Diesel oil—the feel of the motor beneath your foot, and a load behind you . . ." He sighed, and added: "But it jars your kidneys loose if you keep at it too long." He put a hand on the door of the Chrysler. "The martinis are waiting."

"Keep them cold," I said. "I'll be around later. Where do you live?"

He looked at me for maybe half a second. Then he said: "The last house on the right on Frazier Road—the top of the hill. We usually eat around seven. If you want a drink, come before then."

"I'll be there before seven," I said, smiling at him.

He nodded seriously, got into his car and drove away.

It was ten minutes after five when Louette Hopkins came out of the office. I got a full view of her as she stood on the stone steps above me. She was nice to look at. She was small, but she had a neat, slim little figure. The sun made blue glints in her black hair. When she saw me, she looked annoyed.

"I thought you left with Mr. Dorn," she said.

"I waited to take you into town."

She tossed her hair away from her forehead and looked down the highway. "There'll be a bus along in a few minutes."

I nodded at my Ford. "My car's right there."

She looked directly at me. "It won't do you any good."

I said: "I can at least buy you a drink."

She still looked annoyed, but she moved towards my car. I opened the door for her, and as she got in, she said: "We'll skip the drink. I live on South Main Street."

I headed the Ford down the highway toward town. She took a cigarette from a purse, and I plugged in the dash lighter and held it for her. She looked at me over the end of the cigarette and exhaled smoke. "You don't look like a lawyer," she said.

I kept my eyes on the road. "What do I look like?"

From the corner of my eye I saw her turn in the seat and I knew she was looking at me. She didn't speak, and I shot her a quick glance. She laughed then, a

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soft, knowing laugh. Her eyes were suddenly friendly.

"I'm happy tonight," she said. "And I meant it—about quitting. Bill—Mr. Dorn—has been wonderful to me, but—"

"But what?" I asked.

She changed the subject. "What do you look like, Mr. Fiske? You look a little like an Arizona cow-hand, or maybe a lumberjack in his Saturday night clothes—or maybe a construction foreman. You look a little hard, and your eyes have seen too much—even for a lawyer."

"How do you know I'm a lawyer?"

"Aren't you? I must admit you are a contrast to the other two men she sent down here. They had their pockets stuffed with legal documents, and they smelled like damp courtrooms." She laughed a little.

"I'm just a—a guy," I said. "Your mother—"

"Turn left at the next street," she said. "It's the second house on the right." The friendliness was gone from her voice.

I turned into the street and stopped in front of a big white house with green awnings and lots of lawn. A small sign on the boulevard read: *Rooms, By Day or Week. Mrs. McGinnis.* I sat with my hands on the wheel.

"Why are you so bitter toward your mother?" I asked Louette Hopkins.

She looked down at her clasped hands. "I don't mind telling you—now," she said in a low voice. "But I told you why. Maybe I made a mistake when I was a kid, but I'm not the first girl who went overboard for a black-haired boy with nice teeth and a soft voice. I was sorry—right away—but it was too late to go back then, knowing my mother as I did. But they found me, and I had to go back, because I was still under age. I—I guess I was glad they found me—she was my mother, and I wanted to be with her. She was nice to me at first, but then she began to talk about—about Johnny, and I wanted to forget him if I could. But she wouldn't let me. I couldn't stand it any more, and as soon as I was eighteen, I left. Afterwards, I was sorry—again. I wrote to her. I—I wanted so badly to live a normal life like other girls. But she didn't answer my letters. After a while I gave up trying, and I made a new life for myself. I just don't feel anything any more. I don't want to be bothered. I'm sorry that Mother is ill, but there is nothing I can do about it. I . . ." She stopped talking, and I could see her chin tremble a little.

I put a hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you go home and give her another chance?" I tried to sound fatherly, but I was thinking: *Fiske, you dog, quit thinking about that five hundred bucks.*

"I can't go home now," she said quietly. "It's too late."

"You're her only heir," I said. "If you go home—"

She shook her head so violently that her black hair brushed my face. "I don't want her money—not any part of it."

"Money is always nice to have," I said, "and your mother is not well." I stopped on a suggestive note, and I wondered grimly if there was anything that a man wouldn't do for money.

I NEVER knew what she would have said to my last remark because a red Plymouth stopped across the street and a man got out. He was a big broad man with sun-bleached yellow hair and a tanned handsome face. He was wearing tan whipcord slacks, buckskin moccasins, and a belted tan jacket with deep flap pockets above and below the belt. It was the type of jacket that big game hunters used to wear in Africa—still do, for all I know. He walked around in front of my Ford and poked his head in the window on the girl's side. He had a hard brown look, and his eyes were slate-gray, with no depth to them. They flicked impersonally over me and came to rest upon Louette Hopkins."

"Hello, honey," he said. "How about dinner at Mike's?"

She said: "All right, Dick. I—I wanted to talk to you anyhow." She lifted a hand. "This is Mr. Fiske. Dick Costain."

He nodded and smiled, and I did the same.

Costain opened the door, and the girl

got out. "Thanks for the lift, Mr. Fiske," she said.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" I asked.

She bit at her lower lip. "I'm afraid not."

Costain winked at me. I nodded at the two of them and drove away. I thought dismally: *There goes five hundred bucks.*

But I hadn't given up yet.

I found Bill Dorn's house without any trouble. It was a low white frame house on the top of a hill on the north side of town with a terrace and a sloping lawn overlooking a long green valley. There were purplish humps of hills in the distance, and the state highway was a white cord winding north.

I parked the Ford behind a gray Mercury coupe in a gravel drive which circled around to a double garage in the rear and walked back beside a waist-high hedge to the front door. I lifted a brass knocker, let it fall twice, and in a minute the door opened and a girl stood looking at me.

She was a rather small girl, slender, with bronze hair done high on her head, wide-set brown eyes, a clear white skin with a few tiny golden freckles over her short nose, a full, well-shaped mouth, a round chin. She was wearing a plain pale gold dress, low in front and snug at the waist, and gilt, high-heeled, thick-soled sandals. On one slim ankle was a thin gold chain looped through a tiny gold heart and padlock. I squinted my eyes, and I could almost make out the engraving on the heart. I thought it read *Bill.*

I looked up at her standing on the steps above me. "I'm Mr. Fiske." It sounded silly, even to me.

Her smooth brow wrinkled a little. "Fiske?"

"From Milwaukee."

She laughed suddenly. "Oh, yes—Bill's guest." She peered out along the drive. "Where is he?" Her voice was soft and pleasant to listen to. She spoke each word distinctly, with full syllables, like an actress would say them.

"I had some business to attend to," I said. "I guess I beat him out here."

She stood aside. "Come in, Mr. Fiske. He'll be along shortly."

She took my hat and I followed her along a tiled hallway into a forty-foot living room with white walls and mirrors and a thick sand-colored rug. The dying sun slanted yellowly through wide French windows overlooking the terrace and laid golden squares across the rug. She opened the French windows, moved out to the stone terrace and motioned me to a chromium and leather chair. I saw a low glass table loaded with the paraphernalia of drinking—silver ice bucket, cocktail shakers and mixing glasses, soda syphon, bottles of whiskey, gin and vermouths. I sat down and let a cool breeze from the valley caress my face.

Mrs. Dorn bent over the table, facing me, and the low front of her dress fell loosely away. It was impossible not to look. She caught my glance and smiled very faintly. I felt like a yokel, and I lit a cigarette to cover my confusion. She turned a little away from me, but the view was still good—a clean little profile, slim hips, neat straight legs. I began to feel sorry for Bill Dorn.

"What will you have to drink, Mr. Fiske?" she asked in her soft voice.

"It's hard to decide—with a lay-out like that."

She smiled at me. "My friends tell me that I make a passable martini."

"You've got a customer," I said.

She smiled again, and I watched her deftly place ice in a tall glass. Then she poured gin and vermouth, added a sprinkling of bitters, and stirred gently. She poured off two drinks into thin-stemmed cocktail glasses and handed one to me. I tasted. It was a good martini—smooth and cold and dry.

She sat down in a chair close to mine, crossed her good-looking legs, and sipped at her drink.

"Your friends are right," I said.

She raised her glass to me. "Thank you, Mr. Fiske. What firm are you with in Milwaukee?"

I thought fast, and I remembered a little black-and-white fox terrior I had owned when I was a kid. Being a girl-

dog, I don't know why I called her Duke, but that was her name, and she had been killed by a truck. I had made a wooden box and buried her in the back yard with her collar and food dish. I suppose that Dorn's trucking business made me think of it. I took a swallow of my drink before I answered, and when I spoke I was amazed at my glibness. Maybe it was the martini.

"The Duke Bottling Company," I said. "We hold bottling and shipping contracts for some of the big breweries up there, and I'm making some distribution and shipping contacts in Ohio."

I finished my drink in one swallow. I was a little pleased with myself.

Mrs. Dorn thoughtfully fingered the stem of her glass. There was a little smile on her lips. "Very interesting, Mr. Fiske," she said.

I nodded and smiled politely.

"*Very* interesting," she repeated softly, and the smile was still on her lips. "Especially since there isn't any Duke Bottling Company in Milwaukee."

I TOOK a long time in crushing out my cigarette and lighting another. Then I grinned at her. It wasn't a very convincing grin. I said: "There was a Duke Bottling Company in Milwaukee yesterday."

She picked up the stirring glass, leaned across the narrow space between us, and refilled my glass. I got a faint clean whiff of sandalwood and a close-up view of a small pink ear.

I tasted the second drink. "Better than the first," I said. "The slight ice dilution improves the flavor of the vermouth."

She nodded gravely. "I used to live in Milwaukee, Mr. Fiske. In fact, I was born there. My family lives there now. I know all about Milwaukee."

I heard a car come up the drive. It was a welcome sound. Janet Fiske stood up. "Excuse me. That'll be Bill." She disappeared through the French doors, the gold dress rippling over her hips.

I carried my drink to the edge of the terrace and looked out over the valley. In a minute I heard voices behind me, and I turned.

Louette Hopkins said: "Hello."

The big tanned man named Dick Costain stood beside her. He nodded, not smiling, and moved directly to the table and began to make himself a double manhattan. Bill Dorn came out to the terrace. He was steady on his feet, but his blue eyes had a hot shine to them.

"Hi, Fiske." Dorn waved a hand. "Stopped at Mike's for a drink on the way home. Met a couple of friends. Talked 'em into coming out for dinner." He nodded at Costain. "Meet Dick Costain, my efficient little secretary's boy friend."

I mumbled that I had met Costain. Louette Hopkins smiled uncertainly and lowered her eyes. Janet Dorn came out and linked her arm through her husband's. Dorn jerked impatiently away from her and moved to the table. I saw a flicker of pain cross Janet Dorn's eyes. Then she laughed. "Everyone help themselves," she said gaily.

Louette Hopkins said something to Mrs. Dorn and went into the house. Costain looked up quickly, and his eyes followed her. Dorn poured himself a half a glass of bourbon and began to drink it straight. Costain poured his oversize manhattan into a highball glass and began to sip at it.

Dorn nodded at the concoction in Costain's hand. "Why don't you drink like a man?" he said. He was smiling, but there was an edge to his voice.

Costain's tanned face darkened a little. "Everyone to his taste," he said and moved over to me. With his back to Dorn, he winked at me, but there was no humor in his eyes. "What's your racket, Mr. Fiske?" he asked pleasantly enough.

Janet Dorn said: "Mr. Fiske works for the Duke Bottling Company in Milwaukee."

I shot her a glance, but her face was composed.

"Never heard of it," Costain said. "How's business?"

"Fair," I said. "How's your's?"

He laughed shortly. "Terrible. I'm losing my shirt. If the market doesn't get better, I'll have to go to work."

Janet Dorn murmured: "What a horrible thought, Dick."

"Isn't it?" he said, and moved back to the liquor supply.

Dorn finished his drink and abruptly entered the house.

Janet Dorn said: "Do you suppose anyone is interested in dinner?"

"Let's drink our dinner," Costain said. He refilled his glass and carried it to the door. "Excuse me," he said, and went inside.

Janet Dorn sighed. "Poor Dick. He's having a bad time, I'm afraid. He's in love with Louette, but she won't marry him."

"Is that all he does for a living?" I asked. "Just play the market?"

She nodded. "As far as I know. He never seems to do anything else. He came to town about a year ago—at about the same time Louette went to work for Bill. He and Louette live in the same rooming house."

"He seems all right," I said. "Why won't Louette marry him?"

She lifted her slim shoulders. "Louette's a strange girl. Rather moody—but terribly efficient—or so my husband tells me." She sighed. "Everyone is so unhappy, it seems. Why does it have to be that way?"

"I don't know," I said. The sun was a red glow beyond the hills and the valley was already in shadow. The air was suddenly cool and a night wind swept the terrace.

Janet Dorn shivered. "Shall we go inside?"

"We may as well join the crowd," I said.

"I'll straighten up here a little," she said, and she moved over to the table.

I heard voices in a small room adjoining the long living room. And then there was a sharp thudding sound and a muffled crash. I moved swiftly over the carpet to the door of the small room and peeked in.

Bill Dorn was getting up from the floor. Behind him was an overturned chair. Louette Hopkins stood with her back to a wall lined with bookshelves. Dick Costain stood in the middle of the room, his right fist cradled in the palm of his left hand. He was looking at Dorn and there was a smoky glint in his slate-colored eyes. I saw blood at the corner of Dorn's mouth. None of them saw me and I stepped quickly backward and stood against the wall.

I heard Dorn say: "I'm sorry, Dick."

Costain's voice said: "Go to hell."

I went back to the terrace and made small talk with Mrs. Dorn.

CHAPTER THREE

Blackmail

DINNER was a dismal affair. I was glad when it was over. Afterwards Bill Dorn got me alone in the bathroom.

He looked in a mirror. His upper lip was swollen a little. Without glancing at me, he said: "When she leaves, follow her. She just told me that she's going over to a friend's house—Susan Andrews, a girl who lives on the south side of town. Bleeker Street, red brick house. Supposed to see her about arrangements for a bridge party—something like that." He laughed shortly.

"All right," I said. "Why did Costain sock you?"

He swung his lean, high cheek-boned head toward me. If his hair had been black instead of red, he would have looked like an Indian.

"I was snooping," I said. "That's what you're paying me for."

He grinned a little. "You aren't particular where you snoop, are you?" He turned back to the mirror and gently probed his upper lip with a forefinger. "If you must know, I was trying to kiss Lou. She's damned attractive, and well, dammit, why shouldn't I? Only Lou didn't cooperate, and I guess I was pretty clumsy about it. Costain walks in on us, and he sees red. He's nuts about Lou—and he socked me. I don't blame him. But Lou was handy, and the way things are between Janet and me—I guess I was just trying to get even—little kid stuff."

I mumbled something and we went

back into the living room. Costain and Louette Hopkins were leaving. They nodded at me, and Janet Dorn walked to the door with them. Dorn lit a cigarette and paced restlessly around the living room. Janet Dorn came in from the hallway.

"I'm leaving now," she said to Dorn. "Don't wait up for me."

"All right," he said in a tight voice.

She looked at him an instant with puzzled eyes, then she turned to me. "Come again, Mr. Fiske," she said, "and tell me more about Milwaukee."

"Thank you," I said gravely.

She went out.

I said to Dorn: "She didn't fall for that Milwaukee stuff. Why did you have to pick her home town?"

He waved a hand impatiently. "I don't know—it was the first town which came to my mind. It doesn't matter. You better get going. She drives a gray Mercury coupe. Let me know as soon as—as soon as you know anything."

I nodded. "I don't like this job, but I guess I'm stuck with it. You'll have to do some fast talking to that Hopkins girl tomorrow. She's pretty determined to leave."

"I'll handle her," he said.

"You better," I told him, and I moved out to the hallway and waited by the front door.

It was dark now, and I saw the red tail lights of Janet Dorn's car turn out of the driveway. I went out, got into the Ford, circled the drive, and followed the Mercury with my lights out. She drove straight to the center of town, and she parked on the court house square. I parked a half a block away and watched her. She got out of the Mercury, crossed the street, and went up a dark stairway beside a drug store. There were lighted windows above the drug store. Black letters in one of the windows read: *McGovern Business College. Day and Night Courses.*

I walked down the street, entered the drug store and had a glass of ginger ale. I sat on a stool where I could see the Mercury parked across the street. After a while I went out and sat on a park bench in front of the courthouse. I had been there maybe twenty minutes when the big kid called Lester came down the street. He spotted the Mercury, stopped, peered into it, and then crossed the street and entered the drug store. I got up and entered the drug store, too.

Lester was sitting in a back booth along the wall. There was a chocolate soda sitting on the table in front of him, and he was bent over a sheet of paper and printing on it with the stub of a pencil. I made out the black words, MR. DORN, before he looked up and saw me. He crumpled the sheet, stuck into his coat pocket, and began to suck on the chocolate soda.

"Writing a letter, Lester?" I asked him.

The soda gurgled in the bottom of the glass, and he began to spoon up ice cream. He didn't look up.

"Let me see it," I said.

He looked up at me then. Some of the ice cream was running down his chin. "Scram, chum," he said.

I said gently: "Let me see that paper, sonny."

He ignored me, lapped up the last of the ice cream, and started to get out of the booth. I put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back down. It took a lot of pushing, but he went down. He glared up at me, and his loose mouth curled. There was a reddish tinge to his wide-set pale eyes.

"The paper, sonny." I held out a hand.

His head went suddenly downward and forward, and his teeth grabbed my hand and held on. I shook my hand loose, swung around with my left and smacked him hard across the face. His head hit the back of the booth and he sat with his eyes tight shut. Tears began to stream down his flabby white cheeks and mingle with the ice cream on his chin.

Up in front of the store a skinny soda jerk raised his head and looked back at the booth. I grinned at him, and he went back to reading a magazine. There was nobody else in the store except a couple of giggling girls standing in the doorway looking for a pick-up.

"Take it easy, Lester," I said. "Just give me that paper and there won't be any trouble."

He stared up at me. "No," he said, and there was cold hate in his lack-luster eyes.

"Look," I said in a low voice, "I'm giving you a break. Let's have that paper."

He stuck out his lower lip and swung his head slowly from side to side.

I DIDN'T want any rough house—not in a public place with a hulk of a kid like Lester. I sat down in the booth opposite him, with my back to the front of the store. I slid my .38 from its clip and leveled it at him across the table. It worked. He understood about guns, all right. He licked his lips, and his eyes shifted all over the place. I pulled back the hammer of the gun and twisted my face into a tough look. He didn't monkey around any longer. He reached into his coat pocket and laid a sheet of ruled paper on the table in front of me.

I kept the gun pointed and read the scrawling words: MR. DORN, YOUR WIFE IS WITH THAT MAN AGAIN SHE AIN'T NO GOOD AND YOU BETTER DIVORCE HER RIGHT AWAY. A FRIEND.

I put the paper in my pocket. "Tell me about it," I said.

He didn't talk to me. He talked to my gun. His eyes never left it. He spoke sullenly, in a low voice, like a kid saying, "I'm a bad boy," over and over. "Mr. Dorn is a good guy—and I began trying to tell him—about her. He'd get mad if I told him to his face—she's up there with him now—"

"Who?"

"Willie McGovern."

"The guy who runs the business school?"

He shook his head, his eyes glued to my gun.

"Maybe Mrs. Dorn is studying typing and shorthand," I said.

He looked up at me then, and there was a sly gleam in his eyes. "Oh, sure," he sneered. "Why? She don't have to work. I been watching her. She goes up there a couple nights a week—after everybody else is gone."

"Lester," I said gently, "it couldn't be that you kind of go for Mrs. Dorn?"

That got him. He forgot about my gun and sat up straight and puffed out his chest. "Why not?" he said loudly. "I got lots of girls. When she comes in the office she always smiles at me, and she's pretty, and she smells nice. I know she likes me. If it wasn't for Mr. Dorn, she'd be my *best* girl, next to Louette."

"Sure," I said, "and you figure if you can get Mr. Dorn to divorce her, you'll have her all to yourself."

He leaned across the table and talked in a confidential tone. "She can't let on how much she likes me, but old Lester knows that if it wasn't for *him*—"

"Shut up," I snapped. I was getting a little weary of Lester. "What about this Willie McGovern?"

"She's just having a little fun with Willie," he boasted, "because she ain't happy without me. But old Lester's got the inside track. Only she can't trust herself to be around me as long as she's married. I gotta go." He pushed himself up from the table.

"Sit down," I said.

He sneered at me, and said a couple of nasty words. He had forgotten about the gun in my hand. I reminded him of it by smacking the muzzle against his knuckles. Tears came into his eyes, and he sat down again.

"You leave me be," he muttered.

"Now listen," I said. "I'm letting you go this time. But don't write any more letters and forget about Mrs. Dorn. Got it?"

His head was hanging down, but I could see his eyes rolling slyly up at me. There was a little saliva at the corners of his mouth. He mumbled something, but I didn't get it.

I put the .38 back into the shoulder clip. His eyes followed it. "All right," I said. "Get going—but don't forget what I told you."

He got up silently and shuffled away.

I waited a little while, then I got up and entered a phone booth in the front

of the store. I called the McGovern Business College. A man answered, and I said: "This is Bill Dorn. Has my wife left yet?"

He hesitated. Then he said: "She's taking a speed test right now." He had a high cracked voice. "I see she couldn't keep her secret any longer, Mr. Dorn." He chuckled.

"Secret?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Dorn. About her taking a stenographic course to surprise you. Your wife is a very admirable person, if you don't mind my saying so. She said your secretary might be leaving, and she wanted to surprise you by taking her place. She's done very well. Sixty words a minute, Mr. Dorn. But I'm surprised that she told you—she seemed so anxious to surprise you."

"You know how women are," I said.

"I certainly do," he cackled. "I certainly do."

"Don't bother her," I told him. "I'll see her when she gets home."

I hung up, and I called Bill Dorn. He answered immediately.

"False alarm," I said. "Buy her a mink coat and take her out to dinner. She's been taking a business course at Willie McGovern's Business College. She got tired of being a drab housewife, and she wanted to help you in your business. She wanted to surprise you. I suspect that she and Louette Hopkins got together on the deal. Lester, your office boy, has been admiring your wife from afar. It seems that she smells nice and she smiled at him. He cooked up a love affair between her and Willie McGovern, and he had a crack-pot idea of getting you to divorce her so that she could acknowledge her love for him, the great Lester. You better send him away—he's big enough to hurt somebody. Now all you've got to do is to talk Louette Hopkins into going home with me, and you'll have a secretary right in the family."

"Thanks, Fiske," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I couldn't tell from the sound of his voice whether he was happy or disappointed.

I went back to my bench beneath the trees in front of the court house. At ten-thirty the lights went out in the McGovern Business College and in a couple of minutes Janet Dorn appeared on the sidewalk with a pint-sized man in a baggy blue suit and high stiff collar. They talked briefly, and then the pint-sized man tipped his hat and walked up the street. She crossed to her car, got in, and drove away. I scurried to my Ford and followed her.

She went straight home, put the Mercury in the garage, and entered the house. Dorn's Chrysler was parked in the drive. I left the Ford down the street and walked back across the lawn to the Dorn terrace. There was a lot of shrubbery and many small trees, and I stood in a clump of young pine trees. I had a clear view over the terrace through the wide French windows into the big lighted living room. I saw Janet Dorn enter, move to the radio, turn it on, pick up a magazine and sit down in an overstuffed chair. Then she leaned down, unbuckled the ankle straps of her sandals and kicked them off. She swung her bare legs up on a brocaded ottoman, wiggled her toes, lit a cigarette, laid back in the chair and began to read a magazine. I didn't see anything of Dorn.

I waited. The faint sound of dance music came out to me through the windows. The wind had died down, and the night was very still. I turned my head and looked down across the valley. I could see the tiny lights of cars streaking along the winding state highway, and the yellow dots of windows.

I DON'T know where he came from. There wasn't any sound—just a blinding wicked jolt on my head. I crashed forward into a mass of pine needles. I was all tangled up in a little pine tree, and the needles jabbed at my face and hands. There was a hoarse grunting sound behind me, and something slammed me on the head again. I hung on to the tree and tried to stay on my feet. But my knees wouldn't hold me any more and I rolled under the tree and I smelled pine tar and earth and grass against my face. I rolled over

and instantly there was a heavy crushing bulk on my chest. Fists thudded into my face, and I tasted blood on my lips. I twisted and squirmed and I got my knees up. The bulk on my chest shifted, and I let fly with my feet. There was a gusty sigh of pain, and I saw a black moving mass above me. I reached across my chest and jerked my .38 clear, but the black mass was gone. I heard the pounding thud of running feet and I rolled over on my stomach, my gun arm stretched straight out along the ground. Down by the street, beyond the hedge, I saw a fast-moving object. I squeezed the trigger of my gun and orange flame roared across the grass. But the object kept moving and in a second I couldn't see it any more.

I lay still then and waited for the earth to stop dipping from side to side. After what seemed like a long time things began to settle down, and I sat up. My lips felt pulpy, and my head pounded wickedly. Then I heard music and I remembered where I was. I raised my head.

Janet Dorn was standing on the terrace above me, and the French doors stood open behind her. In the light from the living room I saw her very plainly. Her body was silhouetted perfectly through her thin dress. She was looking out over the lawn, and I realized that she hadn't seen me sitting almost at her feet beneath the little pine tree. I could have touched her bare toes.

"Hello," I croaked. It hurt me to move my jaw.

She gave a little startled gasp and looked down at me. "Mr. Fiske! What —what happened?"

I got slowly to my feet. For a couple of seconds I didn't think I'd make it, but I did. She saw the gun in my hand and her eyes got wide. I nestled the .38 back into its clip and put my hands on the edge of the terrace. That's as far as I got. I just stood there, leaning on the terrace with my head down.

"You're hurt," she said in her soft voice, and I felt her hands on my arm. She pulled, but she wasn't very big, and I couldn't raise a foot to the terrace. I kept lifting it, but it always slipped back.

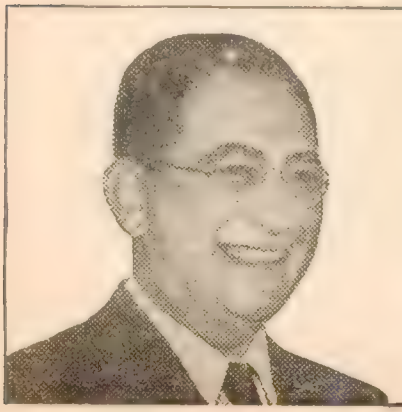
From somewhere a sharp voice said: "Janet! What's the matter?"

I looked up groggily. Bill Dorn was standing on the terrace. He was wearing a white terry-cloth robe and wooden-soled sandals with leather straps. There was red hair on his lean legs.

"Fiske," he said. "My God!" He jumped forward and pulled me to the terrace. He was a big man, and he practically carried me into the house. I flopped into a chair and closed my eyes. When I opened them Janet Dorn was hovering over me with a pan of water in one hand and some tape and gauze in the other. She began to bathe my face. The cold water felt good, and she was very gentle.

I heard Dorn say to his wife: "I didn't know you were home, Janet. I was upstairs taking a shower."

I opened my eyes and looked at him slowly.



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"Your hair isn't wet," I said. I hadn't wanted to say it—I had just wanted to think it.

He laughed. "You're still groggy, Fiske. You don't get your hair wet with a wall shower—unless you want to. What in hell happened?" He crossed the room and returned with two glasses and a bottle of Vat 69. Janet Dorn explored the area above my right ear with tender fingers.

"You should see a doctor," she murmured.

"Hell with doctor," I said. I reached out and took the stiff drink of Scotch which Dorn had poured for me. "This'll fix me up."

It didn't fix me up, but it helped a lot. I leaned back in the chair, and my nerves slowed down from great leaping jumps to little hops.

Janet Dorn put a strip of tape over my left eye. "You might need a stitch there," she said.

Dorn poured more Scotch into my glass, and his wife looked at me expectantly. I was on a spot. I had to give them some kind of a story but I didn't know how much Dorn wanted his wife to know.

Dorn, himself, came to the rescue. He said to his wife: "Fiske and I have been talking business ever since you went away after dinner. He left a few minutes ago and I went up to take a shower." He winked at me, and I knew I had to carry the ball from there.

I said: "All I know is that when I was crossing the lawn somebody slugged me. You got nice neighbors around here."

"But who—?" Janet Dorn began.

"There are some pretty rough characters in the trucking business," Dorn broke in.

"You bet," I said, and I took a swallow of Scotch.

Dorn turned away. "I'll get into some clothes and take you down to your hotel. Maybe you better see a doctor."

"Don't bother," I said. "I'll make it."

Janet Dorn looked at me with worried eyes. I liked her for that. In fact, I liked her for a lot of reasons. I stood up. The room swayed a little, but not too much, and I headed in a fairly straight line for the front door.

Janet Dorn said: "I think we ought to notify the police."

I waved a hand. "Pooh on the police," I said. Maybe it was the Scotch, and maybe it was the beating I had taken, but I said it again: "Pooh on the police." I went out the door.

Behind me, Janet Dorn said in a low voice: "He's got a gun—I saw it in his hand."

I turned slowly and shook a finger at her. "I heard that. I always carry a gun on business trips." It was the truth—only I hoped that she hadn't guessed what my business was. She was too nice a girl to have to find out that her loving husband had hired a cheap dick to tail her around to try and catch her in a love nest.

Dorn called after me: "Sure you'll be all right?"

I lifted a hand. "Sure, sure. See you in the morning."

I crossed the lawn and hit the street. The Ford was where I had left it. I drove back into town. The cool night air felt good on my face.

CHAPTER FOUR

Music Spells Murder

THE WAY my head was aching I knew I wouldn't get any sleep that night. The clock on the dashboard told me that it was twenty minutes past eleven o'clock, and I figured it wasn't too late to make another try for the five hundred bonus for bringing Louette Hopkins home. I had two cups of black coffee at a diner, and then I drove over to the second house on the right on South Main Street and shut off the motor. There were still some lights showing at several windows of the big house. I walked up to the steps of the wide front porch.

A soft voice said: "Hello, Mr. Fiske."

I looked up. Louette Hopkins was standing on the top steps in the shadow of the awning, but even in the dim light I could see the shine in her eyes.

"Enjoying the night air?" I asked her.

"I'm enjoying everything," she said. "Even you. Poor Mr. Fiske. Mother is paying you to bring me home and I'm not going home. Not ever. Isn't that sad, Mr. Fiske?"

I moved up a couple of steps so that I could see her better. She sounded like a girl with too many highballs in her tummy, but when I saw her face in the reflected glow from the street light I knew that she was sober. She was just happy. Everything about her showed it —the way she smiled, the shine in her eyes, the perky, slick way she was dressed. I thought it would be nice to be happy like that.

"Going somewhere?" I asked her.

She nodded, and looked up the street. "I called a taxi—it should be here any minute."

"To heck with the taxi. I'll take you."

She hesitated for a minute, watching me. Then she reached out and touched the tape over my eye. "You have an ouch."

"A what?"

She laughed softly. "When I was a little girl, all scratches and cuts were 'ouches.'"

"You aren't a very big girl now," I said. "Come on. I'll take you where you want to go."

She moved down the steps. "I'm not flattered, Mr. Fiske. I know it's because you want to talk to me some more about gonig home. But I don't care." She laughed, and took my arm.

We got into the Ford, and I said: "Where to?"

"Moonlight Gardens," she said. "It's a dance hall on the river road."

I headed the Ford for the main street of South Crossing. "Isn't it kind of late to be going dancing?"

"A taxi driver wouldn't ask me that," she said.

I grinned at her. "Sorry. You call the turns."

She gave me directions, and pretty soon I saw the river shining in the moonlight.

"Straight ahead," she said. "You'll see it."

She didn't have to tell me when we reached the Moonlight Gardens. It was a big, sprawling, white-painted structure well off the road. An acre of cars were parked around it, and through the screened sides of the building I could see lights and a sea of people. The sound of the music came clearly out to us. It was a good band—sweet, but with a throaty sax section backed by a powerhouse of brass. I turned off the motor and leaned back in the seat.

"That's good music," I said.

"Of course," Louette Hopkins said. "It's Johnny's music."

Nothing clicked in my brain. And then I glanced out of the window and I saw a big blue bus parked close to the dance hall entrance. Across the side of the bus in black and red letters were the words: *Johnny Wingate and His Orchestra.* Suddenly I knew why Louette Hopkins was so happy.

I said carefully: "A one-night stand?"

She glanced quickly up at me. "Do you mean for Johnny—or for me?"

"For you."

"For me, it's forever. Johnny and me. For the band, it's a one-night stand. Tomorrow they go to New York. I'll be with them—with Johnny. . . ."

"First love is true love?" I said.

She nodded her head silently and looked out at the night sky. "It wasn't Johnny's fault," she said. "What happened four years ago. I . . . I don't mind talking about it to you. Johnny was just a wild kid then, and I was a love-struck infant. Neither of us was wise enough or old enough to—to know what we had. We know now. We've both changed, and Johnny's worked hard, and now he has his own band—a good band. We've been writing to each other lately—I don't know how he found out where I was—and we've both been waiting for tonight —when he played at the Moonlight Gardens. He—he wants to marry me. All I've got to do is see him again, hear his voice . . ."

"You didn't give Dorn much notice," I said.

She laughed softly. "Mrs. Dorn knew about it. We are good friends. It was a

little plot between us. Tomorrow she'll be at my desk. She's been going to business school secretly—she wanted to surprise Mr. Dorn, and prove to him that she could do something useful."

I felt old and tired and beat up. I couldn't even try to talk Louette Hopkins into going home on the eve of her wedding day. I said wearily: "What about Costain? Did you tell him?"

Light from the dance hall fell across her small dark face, and I saw her frown slightly. She lowered her head and fingered a purse in her lap. "Yes, I told him—tonight. When he took me home. I feel badly about Dick. He's been nice to me, but I never. . ."

"What did he say? When you told him you were going to marry your—your childhood sweetheart?"

"He—he didn't like it. He had been drinking a lot, and—oh, I don't blame him. Poor Dick. . ."

The music was muted now, and the clear silver notes of a trumpet drifted into the night. Louette Hopkins laid her cheek against my arm. "That's Johnny," she murmured.

We sat and listened until the solo died out on a last sweet wailing note. The girl beside me shivered a little. And then the brass took up the melody with a throbbing, savage beat.

Louette Hopkins sat up straight and opened the door. "I'm going in now," she said, "and tell him I'll be waiting."

I felt a million years old. "All right," I said.

She hesitated, and then she laughed a little uncertainly. "Don't look so sad," she said softly. "You'll find another girl to take home to her mother."

"Sure," I said. "Run along."

SHE LEANED toward me suddenly and kissed me on the mouth, quickly and lightly. Her lips were cool and soft. "You're nice," she said, and then she was gone. I watched her pick her way between the parked cars to the entrance of Moonlight Gardens. She walked quickly and eagerly, with her small chin up. Then she disappeared. In a couple of minutes I couldn't hear the trumpet ony more. I sighed and lit a cigarette.

After a while I got stiffly out of the Ford. My head still ached, and my whole body was stiffening up. I went over to the dance hall entrance, paid a dollar and a half, and moved inside. The orchestra was on a raised platform at the far end of the big dance floor. It was playing softly, and a big colored crystal in the ceiling revolved slowly and cast rainbow lights over the dancing couples. Tables were jammed along the walls, but most of the tables were empty. Everyone was dancing. The music throbbed and sang in my ears, and always the hot brass blared out on the breaks. Johnny Wingate had a good arranger. It was top drawer jazz on the sweet side, but with enough of the brass to give it life. I decided that Johnny Wingate would do all right, and in spite of myself I was glad for Louette Hopkins. But I couldn't forget about the five hundred bonus I wasn't going to collect.

I stopped by a table next to the orchestra stage. A kid in a white coat was standing nearby listening to the music. "Which one is Wingate?" I said to him.

"He ain't up there now. I saw him go out the back door a little while ago."

I looked around, but I couldn't spot Louette Hopkins. I had an uneasy feeling, but I didn't know why. I had had it a little while before, and I was restless. It reminded of the time in Youngstown when I had walked down a black alley alone to meet a two-bit blackmailer and he had blasted at me with a .22 rifle from behind an ash can.

I opened a door beside the orchestra stage and moved slowly down a dim hallway. In the narrow space the blare of the orchestra was deafening. A weak bulb burned at the end of the hall, and I saw another door. I opened it and stepped out into the night. I closed the door behind me and stood still. The sky was black above me with only a few stars glimmering, and far across a field cars zoomed along the highway. I smelled grass, and a night breeze whispered across my face. I stood still and waited until I could see better.

Things began to take form—a stack of empty beer cases in the weeds, a stunted apple tree, some bushes and a pile of tin cans. My eyes caught a movement off to my left, and I heard a kind of strangled sobbing sound. A figure came running in out of the weeds, and I stepped quickly forward.

"Hey," I said.

And then Louette Hopkins was in my arms. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, her hair was in my mouth, and she couldn't stop sobbing. I got her by the shoulders and jerked her a little. She pointed a finger, and I saw her white face and the black outline of her open mouth.

"Stay here," I told her, and I ran out into the weeds.

He lay on his back, with one leg doubled beneath him. His arms were flung wide, like dead men fall in the movies. He had on a white suit—I could tell that much in the darkness. I struck a match. He had thick, neatly-parted black hair, straight black brows, and a smooth tanned face. His lips were parted a little, and the edges of his teeth gleamed in the flicker of the match. There were three distinct blotches of red on the white front of his double-breasted coat. I laid the back of my hand to his cheek. He was still warm. Then I saw the gun lying beside him—a pearl-handled .32. I dropped a handkerchief over it and picked it up.

Behind me I heard Louette Hopkins moaning over and over: "Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. . ." It was a sound that made you want to curse for a long time.

I put the gun in my coat pocket and walked back to her. "It's a one-night stand," I said. "For both of you." My voice sounded harsh in my ears.

She leaned limply against the wall of the dance hall, and her voice was a dry whisper. "Johnny, Johnny, Johnny..."

I got Louette Hopkins by one arm and I led her back to the car, and I got the hell out of there. She didn't say anything or make any noise. A couple of miles down the road I pulled off to the side and stopped on a grassy bank overlooking the river. I took the pearl-handled .32 from my pocket, held it in the handkerchief, and flipped open the cylinder. Three cartridges had been fired. There was a small silver plate inlaid in the base of the butt. I looked at it closely under the dash light. The silver plate was engraved with a name: *W.F. Dorn.* I wrapped the handkerchief around the gun again and put it back in my pocket.

I looked at Louette Hopkins. She was staring out over the river.

I said gently: "Feel like telling me about it?"

She turned to look at me. "Johnny's—dead. . ."

I nodded silently.

She began to talk in a dull expressionless voice. "They told me he was out in back. I heard the shots as I opened the door. And then I heard him—out in the weeds—moaning a little. I found him and he tried to talk to me. He . . . He said something. . ."

"What?" I asked sharply.

"I don't know. It sounded like 'bush,' and then he said a man's name. He smiled at me, and then he. . ." She covered her face with her hands. She didn't make any sound, but her whole body shuddered.

"What name?"

Her voice was muffled. "It . . . It sounded like 'Jack,' but I . . . I don't know. . ." She began to sob brokenly.

I pulled her to me and I held her a long time. After a while her body was still. I gently disengaged my arm, and started the Ford. I drove back to town and stopped at her rooming house. I helped her out and went up to the porch with her.

"Go to bed," I told her. "Don't say anything to anybody until you hear from me."

She nodded silently and slipped quickly into the house. I waited maybe three minutes before I struck a match and looked at the mail boxes by the front door. There was one bearing the name of Richard Costain, but it didn't give me any clue as to where I would find his room.

I OPENED the door, entered a big dimly lit hall, and climbed a wide stairway. There was another hall at the top, with three doors on one side, two on the other. There was light showing at two of the doors, and I stopped by the first one and listened. I heard a faint sobbing sound from inside—low-pitched and full of despair. Louette Hopkins, I guessed, and moved on down to the next door with light showing beneath it. I rapped softly. A fat woman in hair curlers and a quilted robe opened the door and glared out at me. I told her I was looking for Richard Costain.

She nodded her head at a door across the hall. "That's his room—but he's in bed. A couple of hours ago he told me to call him at seven in the morning."

I thanked her, and she closed the door. I stood still and watched the crack of light spilling from beneath the door. The light didn't shift, and there was no movement of shadow. I grinned to myself, crossed the hall and rattled my knuckles against the door the woman had indicated. I knocked three times before a sleepy voice from inside said: "Just a minute."

I waited. Presently the door opened and Costain stood looking at me. He was wearing pajama pants, but no tops, and his broad naked torso glinted bronze in the glow from a bedside lamp. His face was flushed, and his eyes looked puffy.

"Sorry to get you out of bed," I said, "but I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes."

He rubbed his eyes. "Sure, Fiske. Come on in."

As I entered his room I shot a quick glance behind me. The light was gone from beneath the door across the hall, but the door was open a discreet half inch. Costain closed his door and motioned me to a chair. He sat on the edge of the bed. He had a big room, comfortably furnished. An alarm clock on the table beside his bed ticked quietly away. I saw that the alarm hand was set for seven o'clock in the morning.

I nodded at the clock. "I see you don't trust your landlady. She said you asked her to call you at seven o'clock."

He smiled. "I don't trust the clock. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. And I've got to be in Columbus at ten tomorrow to see my broker."

I said: "Johnny Wingate was murdered tonight."

He looked startled. "Who?"

I repeated the name, and I watched him.

He got to his feet and began to pace around the room. "Wingate? Hell, that's Lou's boy friend—the orchestra guy. My rival." He laughed bitterly. "Tonight was the big night, and they were going to live happily ever after. She told me." He swung suddenly toward me. "What are you, Fiske? A cop?"

"No. Just a private dick."

He lit a cigarette. "I wondered," he said. "How did he get it? Wingate, I mean?"

"He went out of the back door of Moonlight Gardens and somebody shot him in the chest."

He whistled softly and began to take underwear, socks. He got a suit from a closet and laid it on the bed.

"Where are you going?" I asked him.

"Where am I going? To the cops, of course. I'm hotter than a firecracker. I'm the jealous rejected suitor—a perfect suspect. I've got to get down to the station and give them my story before they come after me with handcuffs."

"Take it easy," I told him. "The cops don't know it yet."

"You didn't tell them?"

I shook my head. "It'll keep for a little while—but not for long. I figure until the dance is over at least and maybe a few minutes longer. I'm doing a job for Dorn, and I wanted to give him all the breaks I could."

"Dorn? What's he got to do with it?"

I patted the pocket with the .32 in it. "The gun I found beside the body has Dorn's name on it."

He began to button his shirt. "My God, Fiske—Bill isn't that dumb. If he wanted to murder somebody, he wouldn't leave a calling card like that. Anyhow, what's he got against Wingate? *I'm* the guy with a reason to kill him."

He laughed shortly and began to knot a green knit tie. "A couple of reasons in fact. Two very good reasons for murder. I'm nuts about Lou, and Wingate was going to take her away from me. Not only that, I'm broke besides. Bad broke. I figured if I could get Lou to marry me I could talk her into going home to her mother and then she would get all her mother's dough. Quite the cad, aren't I? But it's just as easy to love a rich gal as a poor one—and I've sure got it bad for Lou, dough or no dough. I'm a set-up for this deal, and I ought to get the hell out of here—fast and far. But the chief's a friend of mine, and maybe it'll work out. But why drag Dorn into it? That gun is obviously a plant."

"Maybe," I said. "But he could have dropped it—and not have time to go back after it. And he kind of goes for Louette, too. He made a pass at her tonight."

Costain slowly buckled his belt and looked at me silently. Then he said: "You get around, don't you?"

I shrugged.

He said curiously: "What kind of a job are you doing for Dorn?"

"Short shipments," I lied. "He thinks one of his truckers is selling part of his cargoes."

He nodded, and put on his belted tan jacket. "Come on," he said, and he turned out the light. I followed him out to the hall.

The door opposite Costain's room was still standing a little ajar. I crossed the hall, put my mouth to the crack and said: "Boo!"

The door slammed shut. Costain chuckled. "Mrs. McGinnis won't sleep tonight. She takes a personal interest in her roomers."

We went down the stairs and got into my Ford. I made a U-turn and headed away from the center of town.

Costain said: "This isn't the way to the police station."

"We're going to see Dorn first," I said.

He lit a cigarette, and he didn't say anything.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kill-Crazy

AT DORN'S house I parked in the drive behind an old jalopy with a ragged fabric top. There were lights in the house, and when Costain and I went up to the front door we met Dorn, his wife, and an old guy coming out. The old guy had gray hair and a broad tough face. He was dressed in blue work shirt, blue jeans and heavy greasy shoes.

Dorn looked surprised. "Hello, Fiske," he said. He ignored Costain, and nodded at the old guy. "This is Pop Hennessy, Fiske. Lester's father. I told you he works for me. Lester's in some kind of trouble, and Pop came out to see me about it. We're going over to his place now."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

The old guy's face was grim. "Who is this feller, Bill?" he asked Dorn.

"A friend of mine, Pop. Maybe he can help." He looked at me. "Pop says that Lester came home tonight with a bullet wound in his arm, and he won't tell how he got it. He wants me to talk to Lester."

The old guy said grimly: "He's my boy, but I woulda put him away long ago. Only his mother—" He sighed. "I knowed he would get in bad trouble, sooner or later."

Costain shot a quick glance at me and turned away.

"We'll all go," I said. "I want to talk to Lester, too."

Dorn hesitated.

The old guy said: "Let 'em come, Bill. If they're friends of yours, it's all right with me."

Janet Dorn took hold of her husband's arm. "Maybe Lester would listen to me. . . .?"

It ended up with all of us going over to Pop Hennessy's house. Costain and I followed Dorn's Chrysler across town to a small, smoke-blackened house on a rutted dirt street. We went up to the porch—Bill Dorn, his wife, Janet, Pop Hennessy, Costain and me. Pop Hen-

nessy went in first, and the rest of us crowded in after him. We stood in a meagerly furnished room with bright-colored curtains hanging across one end of it. A red-eyed lumpy woman sat by a big old-fashioned cabinet radio with a wadded handkerchief in her hand. I didn't see anything of Lester.

"Lester," the old guy called.

He came through the curtains at the end of the room. He had a double-barreled shot gun in his hands.

"They ain'ta gonna take me away, Pa," he said. "I'll kill 'em all first."

Dorn said sharply: "Lester! Put that gun down."

Lester shook his big head slowly from side to side. "No, sir. You ain'ta gonna put me in no nut house. Not old Lester." He had on a dirty undershirt and there was a bloody rag wrapped around his left arm above the elbow. And I could see his fingers crooked around both triggers of the shotgun.

I was standing a little apart from the rest of them, and I suddenly felt very lonely. I thought about Louette Hopkins, and I said to myself: *They're all here, all except Louette, and she's the one who should be here because she's the one this fuss is all about.* And then Lester swung the gun straight at me, and I looked into the eyes of death.

"You," he snarled. "You're the one. But you ain'ta gonna put me away. You think you're tough—slapping me around in the drug store. Nobody slaps old Lester and gets away with it. I coulda killed you when I had you down in the grass by Mr. Dorn's house, but I let you go. And then you shot at me, but you only knicked my arm . . . My aim is better, Mr. Face-slapper." He snuggled the gun in close to his belly, and he giggled a little. There was red glint in his wide-set pale eyes. He was standing about six feet away from me, and the twin barrels of the shotgun were pointed point-blank at my stomach.

I went suddenly cold, and I thought: *Fiske, this is as good a look as you'll ever get at your hole card—but it's a hell of a way to go—blasted out by a kill-crazy half-wit.* I tried to decide whether to make a grab for my .38, or take a chance on a dive for him. Either way, I thought dismally, will just be so much wasted effort.

The room was very quiet. The barrels of the shotgun raised about an inch and steadied. Lester giggled shrilly and said to me: "Goodbye, Mr. Face-Slapper."

Dorn took a step toward him. "Put down that gun," he said in a ragged voice.

Lester didn't move and he didn't take his eyes from me. "I can't, Mr. Dorn," he said quietly.

"Lester," said another voice. I didn't look, but I knew it was Janet Dorn, speaking from behind and to the left of me. "Lester . . . please, for my sake. . . ."

His eyes shifted just a little then, and I curled my fingers, itching to make a grab for my .38. But the shotgun didn't waver, and he couldn't miss if he was blindfolded.

The woman sitting beside the radio began to sway and sob loudly. "Don't do it, boy. Oh, don't do it, boy. . . ."

Lester said absently, to no one in particular: "I wrote them notes, and I took Mr. Dorn's gun from his desk because—"

That's as far as he got. The room rocked with the blast of a gun. Lester whirled sideways and hit the floor like a bag of hammers. The shotgun fell clear, and I jumped for it. But I wasn't fast enough. Bill Dorn was already crouching over the big kid's form, and he brought a flat automatic down against his head. Then he stood up. A thin trickle of smoke was still coming out of the muzzle of his automatic. Lester lay very still. There was blood on his shoulder where Dorn's bullet had caught him. The old guy and the red-eyed woman picked him up and laid him on a couch in a corner. The woman was sobbing quietly, and the old guy's face was grim.

I HEARD him say to the woman: "We just gotta do it, Mom. We can't let him run around loose any more."

I said: "Somebody better call a doc-

tor." Janet Dorn moved to a telephone on a table.

I picked up the shotgun, opened the breech, and ejected the two shells, clicked it shut again. I said to Dorn: "Thanks—that was nice shooting. But you didn't have to slug him, too."

"Nuts," he said sharply. "I wasn't taking any chances. Lucky I brought this gun along. Knowing Lester, I figured we might have trouble."

I took the pearl-handled .32 from my coat pocket, unfolded the handkerchief, and held it out for Dorn to see. "Speaking of guns—is this yours?"

He glanced at it, and then he said harshly: "You know damn well it is. It's got my name on it, hasn't it? How did you get it? It was in my desk at the office."

I said. "A man named Johnny Wingate was killed with it tonight behind a dance hall called Moonlight Gardens." I put the .32 back into my pocket.

"Who the hell is Johnny Wingate?" Dorn asked.

"He had a dance band," I said. "He was going to marry Louette Hopkins tomorrow."

Dorn looked at me steadily for maybe a second. Then he glanced helplessly around the room. "What's going on?" he asked plaintively. "What is this?"

Costain spoke for the first time. He sounded weary. "It's murder, my red-headed friend. Somebody pumped three slugs into this Wingate guy and killed him dead. Don't look now, but I'm on the hot seat—or I will be as soon as the cops get on the trail. The whole town knows that I wanted to marry Louette myself. Isn't that nice?"

Janet Dorn turned away from the telephone. "Poor Louette," she said. "Don't joke about it, Dick."

Costain said quietly, "I'm not joking, Janet."

Suddenly I knew what I had to do. I sighed, and I said to Dorn: "Let me have that gun."

He looked down at the automatic in his hand, and then up at me. "Why?" he asked.

I was tired, and my head ached, and I was sick of the whole mess. "Just give it to me," I snapped.

He backed up a little and leveled the gun at me. "To hell with you, Fiske."

Behind him, Costain moved suddenly. His fist lashed out and caught Dorn below his right ear. Dorn stumbled sideways, and Costain wrenched the automatic from his grasp. Dorn went to one knee and shook his head like a fighter on the count of nine.

Costain handed me the automatic, butt first. "I don't know why you want it," he said carelessly, "but there it is."

I said "Thanks," and put the gun in a hip pocket. I was getting pretty well loaded down with hardware, but I didn't want any stray guns floating around the room.

Dorn got slowly to his feet and looked at Costain. "That makes twice tonight, Dick," he said quietly.

Costain turned abruptly away. "Oh, to hell with it," he said.

I said to him: "You may as well call the police."

He turned toward me. "The police?"

I nodded silently.

The old guy over by the couch stood up. "Now, looky here, mister. There ain't no call for that. We'll take care of Lester. He—he didn't mean no harm, honest. We're gonna send him away. Someplace where they'll care for him good, and where he can't hurt anybody."

The red-eyed woman blew her nose and nodded her head up and down. Lester had his eyes open now, and was staring dully at the ceiling. He said in a whimpering voice: "It hurts, Mom."

"Don't worry, Pop," I said to the old guy.

Costain moved to the telephone. "I don't get it," he said, "but if that's what you want . . ." He shrugged his big shoulders.

"I hope you don't mind," I told him. "You said the chief was a friend of yours."

Costain turned slowly. There was a bleak look in his eyes. The only sound in the room was Lester's low whimpering. Janet Dorn backed against the wall

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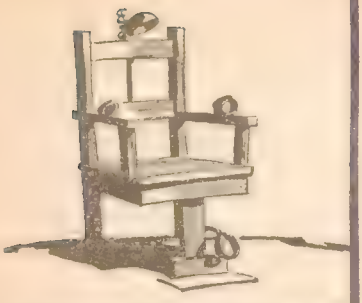


RED RUNAROUND

A Mortimer Jones Novelette

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

The Dusy-driving dick is up to his hub-caps trying to crack a thrill-girl kill and save his client from the hot seat—but it looks as if his only chance is to hire a sitter!

ODDLY enough, I saw him fight Jackie Benson. That was the last fight he had, before the police picked him up, before the D. A. went into action and nailed him clean and tight.

He looked good against Benson. Benson was a buller and a hitter, a flatfooted wader, and that's the kind of man Tod relished. Tod hit him almost at will, counter-punched him silly, marked him up. He didn't put Benson down; nobody had ever put Benson down. But he won twelve rounds of the fifteen. He won a chance at the title. Four days later, they picked him up for the murder of Lila Abbott.

A wealthy family, the Abbotts. Prestige and power. Lila—the tabloids called her the "Thrill Girl"—had been something of a blot on the family shield, married twice, once to a wrestler and once to a count. Neither marriage had lasted longer than a year. She was spending her time with Tod Nelson just before she was killed. It was rumored they were engaged.

She was a thin and hungry-looking blonde and not to my taste, but I could guess at the appeal she may have had for some men. Her thinness was a patrician thinness and her hunger was not for food, I would guess. She was way out of Tod Nelson's social sphere and that would be a lure too, you understand. Perhaps he'd forgotten she'd been married to a wrestler.

The countess was holding a gun very steadily in her hand now. It was pointed at the count.

Well, they made a case. I didn't get too much of it from the papers; I was busy at the time with a hotel skipper. But I saw Devine's picture in the paper the day they picked Tod up, and I could guess that if the evidence wasn't strong enough, Devine might manufacture some. There are lots of homicides in this town, and very few of them are my business. They're Devine's business. He can have them.

ON AN EARLY fall afternoon it became my business. The girl in my office was fairly short and finely built, with red hair and deep blue eyes. Clothed in green, she looked haunted and unhappy.

She said her name was Joan Nelson, Tod's sister. She said I'd been recommended to her by a Nels Keeling who was her brother's attorney. She wanted me to find the murderer of Lila Abbott.

I said: "Your brother's already been convicted of that, Miss Nelson. There isn't much time—"

Her face maintained its composure but I could tell it was an effort of will. "No, there isn't. I—had assumed they wouldn't convict an innocent man. I didn't realize until yesterday how wrong I'd been." Her voice was higher now and her face showed her grief.

I hesitated a few moments before saying more. Not because I needed the pause, but she did. She was tense, fidgety.

I said: "I may uncover nothing. Private investigators cost money, Miss Nelson, and they aren't nearly as infallible as some people believe. I wouldn't want to hold out any false hope in anything as important to you as this."

Her mouth was trembling. "Do you need all those words to say *no*?"

I looked down at my desk top.

She rose. "I understood you were in good standing at Headquarters, Mr. Jones. I didn't realize it was *that* good."

"Please sit down," I said. "Please—" I said. "I'm sorry, Miss Nelson. I'd like to hear your side of the story."

She sat down and told me her side in a dry, flat voice. A few times she had to stop for control, but her voice didn't waver very often. Tod had been in love with the Abbott girl, all right. He'd told his sister that.

"I tried to talk him out of it. I tried to show him what she—was. That count—and then that wrestler—Tod's a good boy, you understand, Mr. Jones. He hasn't had experience with girls—with women like that, and she was clever. Oh, Lord, she was clever enough." The blue eyes were almost black now. "I'm glad she's dead."

I said: "Do you know where Tod was on the night the Abbott girl died? Two witnesses have claimed they were together, and that they were quarreling."

"They weren't together when she was killed," she said. "Tod wouldn't lie to *me*, not about something like that."

"You think the witnesses were lying?"

"One of them was—that man who claimed he saw Tod leave the building at three o'clock, that Al Coleman, the cab driver. He said he knew Tod, you'll remember, and he couldn't be mistaken."

"And where was Tod at three o'clock?"

"Walking the streets. He'd had a fight with Lila—he was restless and unhappy—"

They're always walking the streets. They're never in a crowd of friends or a public, inhabited place or at home with the family. They're always walking the streets. Well, maybe if they weren't there'd be fewer convictions.

I said: "We've only his word on that."

"That's right," she said, and the words were a challenge. Her eyes searched my face. "Don't you believe it?"

"I'll have to believe it if I'm to go ahead," I said. I didn't say that I believed nothing that I heard and only half of what I saw. But that would have been the truth.

She told me more. I put it all down—names and adresses. The count and the wrestler and the cab driver and the waiter who'd heard them quarrel and even the address of the Abbott home and Tod's manager. She had it all in a book.

I said: "You came prepared."

"I've questioned them all myself," she said. "I didn't get anywhere."

No, and I probably wouldn't either. Because I wouldn't have only the facts to search for, I'd have Devine to buck—and Devine's cousin Whitney, who was the D.A. They'd look bad if this case exploded. The papers would give them hell. It was a typical Devine-Whitney job, full of holes they'd probably plugged with intimidation.

I didn't want it. But I couldn't tell that to the girl with the trusting blue eyes and the flame-colored hair. I couldn't take off my armor and throw away my sword in front of her. I couldn't even get down off my white charger.

I said: "I'll do all I can. I'll keep you informed, Miss Nelson. I want to see Tod first."

"I don't think you can," she said quickly. "They won't let you."

"I'm going to try." She rose and I accompanied her to the door. There, she started to say something but stopped. She said "Good-bye," and then I was listening to her heels going down the hall.

I WENT back to the phone and called the chief. "I want to see Tod Nelson this afternoon," I told him.

"He's not here, Mort." A pause. "Or did you know that?"

"I knew it. I want a letter from you to the warden up there. I want it to appear as though I'm on a semi-official mission, if you're agreeable to that."

Another pause, a longer one. Then: "Why, Mort?"

"For a client," I said simply.

"His sister?"

"For a client," I repeated.

"The case is finished. He dies in six days. You don't want to stir up anything there, Mort. He's been convicted."

"All right," I said. "I just thought, considering how I'd always worked with the department, considering that I used to work for the department and knowing your views on cooperation, you'd be willing. . . Oh, well, you're not interested in that. Thanks for listening anyway."

"Where's the fiddle?" he asked me.

"I don't understand."

"The fiddle music that goes with that heart-rending ballad," he explained.

I laughed politely. "O.K., I'm sorry. I guess it wouldn't be good politics for an outsider to mess into that case. I can see your point."

His voice was quiet now and there was no humor in it. "You're not by any chance inferring that I'd obstruct justice, are you, Mort?"

"No," I answered. "But it was Devine's baby, wasn't it? And it would be a poor chief who wouldn't back his own man."

No answer.

"So long," I said.

"Get over here," he said. "I'll have the letter ready. You skate on very thin ice at times, young man."

"Let's forget the whole thing," I said. "I'm not going to buck the department. I never have and I won't now."

"The letter will be waiting for you in my office," he said, and hung up.

There'd be a little speech waiting for me, too. About the dignity of my profession, about cooperation and respect for others and whatever else might come to his careful, tradition-bound mind. But he was a good man and I liked him.

I'd already had an early lunch, so I drove right over. He was in his office dictating the letter when I got there. He didn't smile at me. I sat down. He gave me a short lecture on respect and tact, and then asked: "Why are you digging into this, Mort? Do you really feel that Tod Nelson's innocent?"

I considered that question before answering. Then I said: "I've really no opinion on it at all. But my client thinks he's innocent, and my client's willing to pay me to work on it."

He put his finger-tips together and studied them.

"I'll be tactful," I promised, "And if anything new should develop in the investigation, anything important, I'll see that the proper authorities—"

He interrupted me with a wave of the hand. "I know all that. I'm thinking of Whitney in this, not Devine."

Whitney was Devine's cousin, but he was also an important man and very sharp politically. He was as shrewd as Devine was stupid. It didn't look good

for the chief to be on the other side of the fence from the D. A.

"Whitney might not ever know," I said. "You don't want any doubt in *your* mind about Tod's guilt, do you?"

"No," he said heavily, "I don't. I'd give up this job tomorrow to prevent an innocent man from being punished."

He would, too. I know him well and respected him always. If Devine hadn't been in the department, I'd almost have been satisfied to work here for the chief. But even if I took Devine's job, he'd still be around. My stomach wasn't strong enough for that.

"All right," he said. "Well—luck, Mort." And now he smiled though there wasn't much happines in it.

Outside at the curb, Glen Harvey was just climbing from a department car. "Greetings," he said. "Down on business?"

Glen's a good boy, even if he is Devine's right hand. I said I'd just dropped in to get something from the chief.

He stretched and glanced over at my car. "Still got the Duesenberg, I see," he said companionably. "It would be a nice car to take fishing. My vacation starts next week. How about you, Jonesy?"

"I'm on a case," I said. "I can't loaf on the tax-payers time like you boys."

"Sure," he said, "sure. Your racket I should have."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, give my love to Devine."

He made a face and then shook his head. He looked weary as he walked up the steps to the big door. He looked like he needed a vacation.

The Dusy was murmuring to herself as we moved through traffic, through the afternoon sunlight down Eighth. It was a fine afternoon, sunny but not hot, an afternoon for golf. It was no afternoon for a mission like mine.

He'd been sentenced in July. He now had six days before the man pulled the switch. I was starting on a cold trail, and I'd get very little help from the department on this one. The fact that I was being paid for my time, win, lose or draw, didn't compensate me enough to let me forget how hopeless it was.

I prodded the Dusy gently and she surged. Up the Boulevard to the Drive now. I kicked her and she soared, singing to herself. More than ten years old, my baby, and there still isn't anything on the road that can even give me a fair race.

I made it in excellent time. It was a clear road. The Dusy seemed to sigh, when I cut the ignition, as though she was just beginning to enjoy life.

I WENT through a long, long corridor and up some concrete steps and down another corridor to the warden's office. I gave him the letter from the chief and waited.

He was frowning as he read the letter, and he was still frowning as he looked up at me. "This is a little unusual, you understand, Mr. Jones."

I agreed to that.

He sighed. "But—of course—" He tapped the letter, and the frown changed into a near-smile. "For *him,* of course, I'd go a long way."

I said I would, too.

He looked at me. "Didn't you used to work there in Homicide?"

I nodded.

"I know you, now. Mortimer Jones, of course." He pressed a button. "There's —ah—something new on Nelson's case?"

I couldn't tell him I was just working for pay—for Joan Nelson. He wouldn't want a private eye nosing into this. I said: "We're not completely satisfied, for some reason."

He nodded. "Yes. I can see that perhaps—" He shrugged. "Oh, it's probably personal. Maybe, it's just because I used to watch his fights."

"He's a fine boy," I said. "I can't see murder and particularly a woman." I realized, as I said it, that I must have felt that way all along without being aware of it.

Then I was walking along another corridor smelling of disinfectant and food.

Past a guard, past a priest to the cell of Tod Nelson, welterweight challenger. He was sitting on the bed, his head in his hands, when the turnkey let me in.

He looked up slowly, and stared at me.

Finally he said: "I've seen you around, but I don't place you."

"Mortimer Jones," I volunteered. "I'm a private detective. Your sister has hired me, Tod."

He looked away, down at the floor. "It's pretty late for that, isn't it?"

"Maybe. I didn't encourage her. I mean to do all I can and I need your help."

He looked up. "I can't tell you anything I didn't tell the jury time after time. You must know all I've got to tell."

"I can get it. But there might be something else. I thought you might have some ideas on it." I paused. "I thought maybe you could give me a lead to the real murderer."

He stared at me. "If I knew that, don't you think I—"

"Maybe you don't know it," I said. "But if Miss Abbott had had any enemies, she might have mentioned it to you. There may be lots of things you know about her that the police don't." I stopped, trying to read his reaction to all this. He didn't look like a murderer, not to me, but a lot of them don't. Most of them don't. He didn't look like a man who was going to be very cooperative, either.

After a moment, he said: "There isn't anything, anything at all. I think that ex-husband of hers, that Count Terrati still saw her. That's what we were quarreling about. But he's clean; he was out of town that night."

"That didn't come up at the trial, did it?"

"Terrati? No, but they had him locked up with me back in town for a while. They had that Greek there, too, that grunt-and-groan artist. I don't know what his alibi was."

The Greek was Nick Theosophulus, the wrestler, a man of supposedly violent temper. But that may have been only a publicity gag. I studied the slim, quiet lad sitting on the cot, wondering what I should say next.

He got up and went over to look out through the front of the cell. With his back to me, he said: "How's my sister taking it?"

"*She's* fighting," I said.

He turned to face me. "You mean I'm not?"

I nodded.

"In June they picked me up," he said. "In July they railroaded me up here. Now—with five days to go, you come up here asking questions. You think my lawyer didn't put me wise about Devine and Whitney? You think I don't know when I'm up against a fix? Why should Sis pay out what dough she's got left to you?"

"She thinks I can do something," I said.

He shook his head and turned his back on me again.

"A lot of fights have been won in the last five rounds," I said.

"Not fixed fights."

For the second time he turned to face me. His voice was quiet but tense. "Look, it's taken me a long time to reach this state of mind. I'm almost ready, now, for what's going to happen. Don't get me worked up or think something that isn't true." He came over to stand close to me. "And don't get Sis all stirred up about any chances. I know you private eyes. I know how you make your living."

There was no anger in the eyes staring into mine. They were the dead eyes of a resigned man.

"I thought I knew fighters, too," I said.

"Beat it," he said.

I left him. I walked along the concrete corridors, the quiet, grim corridors, and up the clean concrete steps that led to the warden's office.

He said: "Well, Mr. Jones—?"

"Nothing much," I said. "He's not part of this world any more. He's quit."

The warden nodded. "He's been reading the Bible a lot. He's convinced, I think, that he was the victim of a police conspiracy."

Conspiracy was a strong word to use. But he may have been the victim of police stupidity, I thought. Not police stupidity, but Devine stupidity. Maybe the chief thought so, too. And the warden. These were all my unspoken thoughts and undoubtedly were his.

I thanked him and left. I drove down the wide drive to the gate and out through the massive, guarded gate to the highway. It was late afternoon—a pleasant time of day. But my mind was back in that pile of stone, that gaunt, gray mausoleum of men's hopes.

CHAPTER TWO

Big Chair Cool-off

I DECIDED it wouldn't be the count I saw first or the Greek. It would be that taxi driver, the cabbie who'd recognized Tod leaving the apartment building at three o'clock. That was the time he was supposed to be walking the streets. Al Coleman was his name and the prosecution had built a large part of their case on his testimony.

The Dusy began to whine as I prodded her with my right foot.

This Al Coleman lived in a sad-looking duplex near the end of Vine Street. It was a high, narrow place, a converted single-family dwelling. Al lived on the second floor.

The door lock buzzed in answer to my ring and I went in and up a flight of narrow, rubber-carpeted steps to the landing above where a woman waited.

She was a thin and vacantly pretty woman in a colorful house dress. A peroxide blonde, I would guess. She waited quietly and disinterestedly while I told her my name and explained my business.

"Al won't talk to you," she said. "Al's done all the talking he's going to."

Through the open door, I could see a child playing in a pen in the middle of the living room floor. I could see cigarette smoke and hear a radio playing.

"There's a boy who's going to die in five days," I said. "Surely, if your husband can help to prevent that—"

"Al's not interested," she interrupted. She started to close the door.

"I *am*," I said quickly, and flashed my buzzer.

"Save it," she said. Her laugh was short and scornful. "A private dick, geez." The door closed.

I went down the steps again and out to the Dusy. There was a new car here I'd noticed before, a '47 model in a popular make—clean and shiny. I wondered if it was Al's. I wrote the license number down in the book with the addresses.

Maybe Al was fed up with questions. And maybe Al was afraid of questions. I'd seen him again.

The license bureau would be closed now. I could maybe get it through the chief but I didn't want to bother him any more than necessary. This guy I knew in the license bureau would give it to me tomorrow.

I was hungry, but I drove down to the big garage at 4th and Edison first.

It took some finagling. It took some double talk to convince the boss down there that I was on semi-official business. But I finally got the route sheet I wanted.

Al had had a fare at two o'clock from the Harmony Hut to an address out on 53rd. He'd had another at two-thirty from the stand on 12th to a suburban address. At three-twelve, he'd been back at the stand, because he'd picked up another call from there.

Nothing else between two-thirty and three-twelve. Maybe he was cruising. But if he wasn't, he'd taken a strange route from the suburban address back to the stand. Cabbies don't take the long way around, not on their own time.

I phoned Nels Keeling, Tod's attorney, from a drug store but his office didn't answer. I phoned him at home and his wife said he was out of town. I left my office number with her for Nels to call later.

I wondered if Keeling had investigated the strange route of Al Coleman. I didn't think so. He didn't have my suspicious nature. He was a good lawyer, but a bad one for a murder case.

A lot of my work would have to wait until tomorrow. I wanted the testimony in court and Doc Waters' verdict as to the death and I wanted to talk to the technical men personally.

I went over to Mac's for supper. Mac was talking to a customer about Tunney.

"A credit to the profession, that's what he was," Mac was saying. "A gentleman, that's what. He marked Dempsey up plenty both fights. Don't get the idea he was a powder-puff."

"This place open for business," I asked, "or is it your discussion hour?"

"Ha-ha," Mac said hollowly. "You're so funny, Jonesy. Did you want to buy something?"

"Something to eat." I admitted, "and something to drink—if it's not too much trouble."

"I got hamburger," he said. "A hamburger sandwich?"

"With onions. And a glass of beer while I'm waiting."

He drew the beer and set it on the bar in front of me.

"I was just up to see Tod Nelson, Mac," I said.

He was all interest. "You working on that, Jonesy? When'd you start working on that?"

"Today. What do you think of Tod, Mac?"

"A good boy." He nodded emphatically. "He got robbed, Jonesy. Tod's a clean kid. Best damned welterweight in the world, too." He paused. "How's he taking it?"

"He isn't," I said. "He quit."

Mac's eyes were round. "You don't mean—not suicide—?"

I shook my head. "Just mentally. He thinks it's foolish for me to work on it, it's hopeless."

"He don't know you, Jonesy," Mac said, and went down to fry the hamburger.

My boy, my Mac . . . After the humiliation of this day, I had to come here to feed my stomach and my ego.

I had another beer with the hamburger and some coffee after that. Then I went back to my little apartment to shower and shave and put on another suit. I decided I might try to see the count this evening.

THE count had married again, but not for money this time, He'd married a woman from his own background, the world of impoverished royalty. She was a duchess who'd foresaken her use of the title, a slim, dark woman with enormous brown eyes. It was she who opened the door of their apartment to my ring.

"Countess Terrati?" I asked.

She nodded.

I told her who and what I was and that I'd like to talk to the Count.

She sighed. "About that frightful business, Mr. Jones?"

I nodded.

She hesitated. "I can't see, Mr. Jones, what's to be gained by this—"

"Perhaps a man's life," I said.

She sighed again. "Well, all right. But hurry, won't you? We're due at the theatre in half an hour." She led the way to the living room, a vast studio living room furnished in bleached woods and soft colors.

The count sat in an overstuffed chair, reading. He looked up, then rose as I entered.

He was extremely tall, aristocratically thin, with a high, narrow but somehow handsome face. The countess introduced us and explained my business.

He said: "I'd be glad to help in any way I can," and indicated a chair for me.

I sat down and he sat down. The countess went over to stand near his chair. She lit a cigarette but all her attention, I could sense, was on me.

I said: "It isn't my purpose to embarrass you, but you were married to the Abbott girl, count. You were her first husband. If there's anything in her background that might prove helpful in this business, I'd appreciate it."

He was frowning. "I don't—quite understand."

"If I'm to assume Tod Nelson didn't kill her," I went on, "it's reasonable to assume she had some other enemy. It may have been an enemy of long standing or it may have been a prowler. If it is some enemy out of her past, you might know of it."

I was talking to him, but watching her. She was perfectly poised and apparently indifferent, but I could feel her tenseness just the same.

The count was still frowning. "She had all the petty, malicious enemies a woman in her station is heir to, Mr. Jones. I can't believe they were guilty of any crime more vicious than gossip. I certainly don't intend to name any of them."

The countess expelled a cloud of faintly perfumed smoke.

I said: "I wouldn't expect you to, count. It's not a gossiper I'm looking for. It's a murderer."

I thought he flinched.

The countess said quietly: "That was tactless, Mr. Jones. You've forgotten the count was married to Mrs. Theosophulus."

She accented the wrestler's name. She made a savage bit of irony out of that. Again I thought the count winced.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The count didn't seem to be hearing us. He was thoughtful. He looked sad. He said softly: "If she had to die, it's too bad she didn't die before she met that —that animal."

"The wrestler, darling?" the countess asked.

He looked at her and away. He looked at me and said: "I'm sorry Mr. Jones. But there's really nothing I can tell you. I've told police all I knew, which was little. I'd prefer not to talk about it at all."

"I see," I said. "I don't suppose you saw very much of her after the divorce." I rose.

They seemed to be turned to stone. Both of them staring at me.

The count's voice was hoarse. "What did you mean by that, Mr. Jones?"

The countess said evenly: "I'm sure it was another of his tactless remarks." She turned to him. "We'll be late for the theatre, dear."

He seemed to shake himself. "Yes—of course—"

Nobody walked with me to the door. I said good-bye, but the countess only nodded. The count seemed to be still in his daze.

I left them and went down to the car. It was still early and Nick Theosophulus didn't live too far from here. I had never seen a Greek wrestler up close. It should make an interesting study.

The Dusy went purring up Prospect to Kane, down Kane to Newhall and out to a section of small homes and flats. There was a light on at 4534 Newhall. It was a small, frame cottage.

I don't know what I was expecting, but certainly not this. Perhaps I'd been unconsciously expecting a fat and sweaty man in a pair of faded trunks, a bald man with a bullet head. But not this—this Adonis, this Apollo . . . This tall, broad and handsome young man in the sport coat standing there in the open doorway grinning at me.

He was blond and tanned and amiable, right out of *MGM*. He said: "Well, you must have something to say. Say it."

"I'm looking for Nick Theosophulus," I said.

"You're looking *at* him," he answered. "You're a collector, no doubt."

"No," I said. "No, I'm a private investigator, Mr. Theosophulus, and I'd like a little of your time."

"I've enough of that," he said. "Come in."

I went in to a small living room furnished for comfort. I took a chair and he sat on the davenport.

I TOLD him I'd just been to see the Terratis.

"That louse," he said, and his good nature was gone for the moment. He looked at me sharply. "What'd he have to say?"

"Not much. He seemed rather preoccupied."

"Sure, sure. But don't think his mind isn't going a mile a minute. He's fooled a lot of people, that fascist devil."

"Fascist?" I said. "I didn't know that."

"Not many did. But when the Moose was just learning to speak from a balcony, Terrati was very, very close to him. Since Lantern-Jaw took the count, Terrati's changed parties, I hear. He's a red-hot Commie, now."

"Quite a jump," I said.

"Don't even think it," he answered. "It's just a change of name."

"Maybe," I said. "But I don't think

my business has international complications. It's about your former wife, Nick."

"I guessed that," he said. "You working for Tod?"

"For his sister."

"Oh," he said, "Joan." His voice was gentle. He expelled his breath slowly and stared past me. "Tod got a rough deal."

"You know him."

"Sure. I've seen him fight. You don't think he'd use a club if he wanted to kill somebody, do you? You don't think he'd batter a woman to death with a steel bar or whatever the hell was used?"

"It doesn't seem likely," I admitted. "But who else?"

"Count Terrati would be my choice. I wouldn't know why and I know he's got a sound alibi for that night, but it would be his kind of work."

I smiled and said: "Maybe you're prejudiced."

"Maybe. Just don't underrate that yegg, is all. He's smooth, with his fine clothes and scholarly, gentlemanly manners. He's trained to be smooth. Just don't put murder past him."

I said: "You don't think this might have been a—political murder, do you?"

Nick shrugged. "Probably not. But: if she threatened to expose him—" He shook his head. "No. Lila wasn't a political type. She probably never knew what was going on."

There wouldn't be, I felt sure, much information from Nick Theosophulus unless it was information about the count. I asked a few more questions and drew blanks.

I thanked him and prepared to leave.

At the door he said: "You need any help on this? I mean free help? Any errands to run or stuff like that?"

"I guess not," I said, "but thanks. For Tod, huh?"

"Partly. But for Lila, too. We didn't hit it off and she divorced me. But it was fun while it lasted. It isn't anything I'll ever forget."

I said there wasn't anything I could think of, but if I needed him, I'd let him know. I said, Good night and walked down to the Dusy.

They both remembered Lila, I reflected; both Nick and the count. She must have been some girl at that. And they hated each other. Because of Lila? Or because of politics? Because of Lila, I would guess.

There was a car parked up the block, one I hadn't noticed when I drove up. Nothing unusual about that excepting it was the same kind of car that had been parked in front of the cabbie's house this afternoon.

I couldn't read the license number from here. I climbed into the Dusy and the car up the block pulled away. Its lights flashed on as it swung around the corner and disappeared.

I went home to bed.

It was cooler next morning as the wind was from the north. I went over to Mac's for breakfast. I read the paper there and dawdled before walking the half block to my office.

Joan Nelson was waiting in front of my office in a Chev club coupe. She got out as I approached.

Her eyes searched my face. I said; "I've nothing much to report. Come on up to the office."

Up there, I told her what I'd done the day before. I said: "Do you think Tod learned something about the count from Lila? Did he ever mention anything like that to you?"

She shook her head.

I said: "How did Tod meet Lila?"

"Through Mike Bradford. It was at a party."

Mike Bradford was Tod's manager.

"That was after she'd divorced Theosophulus?"

The girl nodded. "It was only about ten months ago." Her hands were in her lap, one firmly locked in the other. Her face was pale, but the deep blue eyes were determined. "How about that Coleman, that cab driver?"

"He won't talk to me. I'm going to do some checking on him today."

"He talked to me," she said. "But I'm sure he was lying. He's the key to the whole thing. I think somebody's bought him."

"Maybe," I said, "but it wouldn't be

anybody I'd seen so far. Al wouldn't travel in those circles. Remember this—from the police viewpoint, he's the perfect, uninterested witness. A cruising cabbie who just happened to recognize Tod leaving the apartment. There's no tie-up, there's no reason for him to lie."

"But he lied—"

"Or made a mistake."

"Mistake," she said in a low scornful voice. "Would he identify someone in a case as important as this if he wasn't sure? If he wasn't sure—or lying?"

"Probably not. Though I've had some strange experiences with witnesses."

Her head was bent now, and she was close to tears. "It's all so confused," she said, "so hopeless." Then she was crying quietly.

CHAPTER THREE

Red Tentacles

THE sun glinted off her red-gold hair, glistened in the tears moving slowly down the pale, faintly freckled cheeks. I wanted to go over and take her in my arms, but I didn't. I sat there and said nothing.

After a few moments, she fumbled in her purse for a handkerchief. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't often break down like that. But it's been such a rotten, *machine-like* business for the beginning. It's as though we're up against something too complicated and too well organized to fight."

"They all look tough until they're cracked," I said. "And the easiest ones to crack are the well organized ones. There's a pattern to those. We've just got to find out who wove the pattern."

She tried a smile, but it was weak. "I don't want you to think I haven't confidence in you, Mr. Jones. Mr. Keeling assured me you were the best detective in town."

I made some remark and told her I would do everything I could. I didn't tell her it might not be enough, and I didn't tell her not to worry, because there wasn't anything for her to do but worry after the deal Tod had received. I told her I would keep in touch with her right along and she left.

Then I sat there for minutes feeling like a knight without a horse. On an impulse I phoned Jack Elder.

Jack was an operative for a nation-wide agency and I knew he'd done some work on the Commies. I asked him about the count.

He didn't answer right away.

"All right," I said. "So it's agency business and Federal business and I'm just a jerk shamus trying to make an honest dollar. It wouldn't matter to you if Tod Nelson went to the chair. You'd get your salary just the same, and your expenses—"

"Stop talking so I can think," he interrupted me. "I'm trying to remember. That was some time ago I worked on that, Mort." Another pause. "If I remember right the count was anti-Commie. It seemes to me he was one of their favorite targets, the dissolute nobleman marrying a product of America's greed."

"That was before Mussolini began to wane?"

"Oh, sure, sure. That was a hell of a while ago. Look Mort, I can get you more on this, current stuff. One of our operatives worked on it recently."

"I'd appreciate it," I said and he told me he'd call me back as soon as he got it.

Then I went over to the courthouse.

The testimony in the Nelson case read like a play, or rather, like the rough first draft of a corny play by a college sophomore. Devine was there as the hero or sub-hero, perhaps, because District Attorney Whitney, one of Devine's crummy cousins, had all the long and hammy speeches. He's a pompous, fairly articulate man who knows more than his speeches indicate. His corn is a calculated corn, devised to swing a jury, and he had swung this one.

Because there'd been no confession because Tod Nelson had a good name in the male public's mind, his villifying of Tod had been by inference only. His relating of the evidence garnered by the able Devine and the (vast) resources of the specialists who'd helped Devine was

detailed, seemingly infallible. His summing up was a mixture of science, logic, corn and venom. It was, as I'd suspected, a Whitney wind-up to a Devine job. And with all the honest, capable, hardworking men in the department, it was a complete mystery to me how Devine hung onto his job—even considering the relatives. Of course, he'd been there a long, long time . . .

I got another idea and phoned a photographer I knew who worked for the local *Courier-Tribune*. I told him what I wanted.

"Not from the paper, Jonesy," he answered. "They wouldn't let 'em out like that. But I got some of my own."

Could I get three of them?

"Sure. Not this morning—I'm just going out. But I could meet you at noon."

I arranged to meet him at noon and went over to the license bureau. There I learned that the new car I'd seen in front of Al's house was his. The license had been granted only a month ago. I didn't know what a cabbie earned, but considering what a person has to pay for a new car these days, considering that he had a wife and child, it wasn't too unreasonable to assume Al might have had a recent windfall. Of course it maybe have been an uncle who died, or something like that. But I'm suspicious, by nature.

I made some other calls: on Tod's manager, Mike Bradford; on the restaurant where the waiter had overheard Tod arguing with Lila. The waiter wasn't there. He was home, sleeping. Mike Bradford was a short man with no hair and a scowl.

"We got a bum decision," he said. "But what can you do? The kid was railroaded by Whitney, and Whitney's sure as hell going to look bad if the case breaks open again. Homicide ain't going to give you any help. You can bank on that."

"They never have," I said, "outside of Glen Harvey. I thought you might know something about Tod and Lila that would give me a lead."

He shook his head. "Tod didn't talk about it. I think he wasn't too proud about getting mixed up with a dame like that. But she sure had the hooks in him."

Not only in him but in Nick and the count, too. And perhaps some others . . . Perhaps the killer, some gent out of her busy past I hadn't met and wouldn't meet. That's the angle you're always dealing with in murder. Some mental defective on the prowl, some minor character nursing an unvoiced grievance, some sudden burst of fury between normally friendly and reasonable people. That's what makes unsolved murders: not the cute and tricky contrivances of the premeditated jobs, but the senseless, illogical incidents of chance.

Only this one looked contrived; that was my only hope—that it was planned and had a pattern.

I went over to meet the photographer for lunch. He had the pictures I wanted, good shots, and from the neck up as I wanted them.

Then I went back to Vine Street, nearly to the end to the duplex abode of Al Coleman, cabbie and key witness.

THE same blonde waited at the top of the landing and she didn't look happy to see me. "My husband's asleep," she said, "and he don't want to be disturbed."

"I won't disturb him any more than I need to," I told her," but it's very important I see him."

"Important to who?"

"To him. And to the police."

That look of scorn came again to her blank face.

"You could call the police department and ask for the chief," I said. "You could ask him about me."

She looked doubtful now, a little frightened.

"Or I can go and get a couple of cops and come back?" I said.

She was frightened. She said: "What's Al done—? Is it about his being a—witness?"

"I don't know he's done anything he shouldn't," I said. "But it's about his being a witness, all right."

She stared at me and then toward the

open door. "Come in," she said. "I'll wake him up."

I went into the living room, a room of mohair and cheap wall paper, a clean, dead room. The play pen wasn't in sight, nor the baby. I took a seat on the davenport while she went through an archway into the house beyond.

I heard a murmur of voices—a grumbling masculine voice, hers getting shrill. I heard some bad words. Then Al said: "Aw right, aw right, lemme get dressed."

She came back into the living room looking pale. "He'll be here right away." She sat on the davenport's matching chair and stared at the rug nervously.

We waited in silence.

Then there were steps coming through the dining room and Al Coleman stood framed in the archway. He was a fairly broad, medium tall man with dark, thick eyebrows and dark, unruly hair. He was wearing dark trousers, a blue cotton shirt and a scowl.

"O. K. peeper, what's the beef?" he said.

"Just some questions," I said, "about the Nelson case."

He was lighting a cigarette. He didn't sit down, but stayed in the archway. "So, go ahead."

"I wondered if you were sure it *was* Tod you saw. I thought you might be wrong about that. Did you know him pretty well?"

"I don't know him at all. I seen him fight lots of times and I know what he looks like. It was him, all right."

"Fights cost a lot of money," I said. "You see many of them?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "I see all the big ones. Maybe I make a lot of money, peeper."

"I see," I said. "We've got some other suspects in this case, too. Maybe it was one of them you saw." I took out the pictures and held them out to him.

He hesitated and then he came over to take them from me. He looked them over carefully, suspiciously.

"Could it have been one of those?"

"No," he said.

"You've seen those men before, though, haven't you?"

He shook his head. "Never." He seemed relieved.

"That's very strange," I said.

The blonde was staring at me. Al was staring at me. I said: "One of them is the lightweight champ, one the welter champ, the other the middle champ. They've all fought here, often. You see *all* the big fights, Al?"

"They're bad pictures," he said. He was breathing hard.

"They're good pictures," I answered. "You could recognize a welterweight contender on a dim street at three in the morning, but you don't know the title-holders."

"What you getting at?" he asked. His eyes were shining, hard.

"And you took a very strange route back from the Heights to the cab stand if you went past that apartment, Al." I paused. "I don't think you were ever there. I don't think you saw Tod that night or even anybody who looked like him."

The blonde said something inarticulate. Al said: "You calling me a liar, peeper?"

"Not yet," I said. "And don't get any ideas. I'm armed."

"Get out," he said. "If you come again, bring a warrant. But get out of here—*now*."

"Al—" the blonde said.

He didn't even look at her. "Shut up!" He was still glaring at me. "Get moving."

I rose. "Sure," I said. "Play it dumb, Al. Cover up for the killer. Let Tod go to the chair. They'll really nail you if that happens, Al. The D.A. will make it a point to see you get the book." I walked to the door.

He didn't say another word. He stood there glaring at me. The blonde had risen and her glance traveled between us, back and forth, back and forth.

I went out and closed the door quietly behind me.

When I was halfway down the stairs I heard his voice, loud and angry. He called her a name. The baby began to squall.

I went out, started the Dusy and drove

down to the corner. There was an angle street here and I turned to park on that. From this position I could watch the new car in front of the Coleman house.

I waited an hour and nothing happened. I waited another half hour and decided nothing was going to happen. I'd banked on his wife not knowing. If she didn't, I figured Al would go to see the person he was covering for. If his wife knew though, he could use the phone.

Well, maybe he figured there was no hurry. Maybe he had only himself to cover, but I couldn't believe that. It didn't add up right.

I drove back to the office. There was some mail up there waiting for me, but nothing important. I was sorting through this as the phone rang.

It was Glen Harvey. He said: "Devine's heard about what you're doing, Jonesy. He wants you to wait at your office for him."

"O.K.," I said. "Thanks for calling, Glen."

I DIDN'T have long to wait before I heard Devine's heavy tread on the stairs. Then he was in the doorway, his thin face sour but showing no anger so far.

As a matter of fact, I thought he looked more uncertain than angry which I didn't understand right away.

He took my customer's chair and said: "I've just had a call from Al Coleman."

I said nothing.

He rubbed the palms of his hands together, and studied them. He looked up. "I know Al. I've known him a long time."

So. No wonder he didn't look angry. I still said nothing.

"I might—" He shook his head. "Maybe I didn't go into his story as well as I should have."

"What did he say to you when he called?" I asked.

"He was complaining about you bothering him. He said you'd been checking his route that night, and you pulled some kind of trick with pictures on him. He said he's clean and he doesn't want any private eyes bothering him."

"And you come here to tell me to lay off?"

Devine shook his head. "I came here to see if I missed the boat."

I could only stare at him. This wasn't the Devine I knew, this reasonable, mistake-admitting searcher for a truth. This was a new characterization and I was wary.

He went through the palm-rubbing routine again. "Haven't you got anything to say?"

"Not much. You surprised me. I wasn't expecting this."

Some of the old hardness was in his voice now. "Just what were you expecting?"

"A dressing down. A few nasty words telling me to lay off or you'd have my scalp."

He looked at me fully. "You think I'd let a man go to the chair if there was a reasonable doubt in my mind about his guilt? You think I'd do that?"

"No," I admitted. "No, you wouldn't. I just can't get the quiet approach."

He ignored that last. He said: "What have you uncovered on Al?"

"Nothing you could jail him on." I went on to tell him about the car and the pictures and the strange route.

He took it all in, frowning. When I'd finished, he nodded. "I've been hearing somethings about Al, lately. It's too bad I hadn't heard 'em before the trial. I bowl with him, you see, and I thought I knew him pretty well."

I was beginning to understand his attitude. He hated my guts but if I could help him, if I could help to get him out of a very bad hole . . . I said: "He should be watched."

He nodded. "I've got Glen Harvey on him right now." He was still frowning. "But where does Al fit in? He hasn't any connections, so far as I know, with anybody who knew the Abbott girl. He looked like a Grade-A witness to me."

"He looked that way to the jury, too," I said. "That's probably what decided them."

Devine looked at the floor, his face rigid. "O.K., O.K.—what makes you think Nelson isn't guilty?"

"Just my belief in him. What makes *you* think so?"

He flinched. "I'm not saying he isn't. I'm saying I might have missed on Al. That doesn't open the case again not all the way."

Not all the way, I thought. *Just enough to worry him. Just enough to make him treat me like a friend.*

"That count," he continued, "was my first choice. That Greek my second. The count's covered all the way and the Greek is clean enough so a jury wouldn't convict him. That leaves Nelson."

"If it's that simple, it leaves Nelson," I said. "There's a hundred and thirty-odd million other people in the country. It could be almost anybody else."

"They were quarreling," Devine said. "The waiter testified to that and Nelson admitted it." He looked at me challengingly. "You got a better suspect?"

I had to admit I didn't have—not right now anyway.

"If you get one," he said, "you'd be in a good position, wouldn't you?"

I knew what he meant. He meant in a good position to embarrass himself and the D.A. He knew that what recent pinches I'd had had gone to Glen Harvey. He knew he hadn't many friends outside of his relatives. He knew the chief wasn't one of his friends.

I said: "I don't quite get you."

"You get me all right," he said.

I shrugged. "You're a part of the department, Devine. You know I never work against the department."

"I'm talking about *me* not the department," he said.

"The only times I've bucked you," I explained, "have been in defense."

"I'm not bucking you this time. Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not afraid of my job or you or the papers. You can believe that or not. I don't give a damn. But I'm admitting I may have missed on that Nelson-Abbott deal. I don't want to see an innocent man burn any more than you do. And if you've got something, I'll work along with you."

I almost admired him. For the first time since I'd known him, he was talking like a man, not an animated boil or an apple-polishing politician. If I hadn't seen him in so many other characterizations, this one would have won me all the way. But I'd known him so long. . .

"O. K.," I said, "I'll be honest with you. I haven't anything but a lot of angles, so far. When and if I fit them together into something that might help, it'll be Homicide's body and *your* baby."

He rose then and held out his hand. "I'll keep in touch with you. And you with me?"

I shook his hand. "I'll let you know anything I find."

CHAPTER FOUR

No Pattern Yet

IT MUST have made a hell of a tableau, me and Devine shaking hands and looking at each other like a brother act. I was glad nobody was watching.

Then I was listening to his heavy feet going down the stairs again. I shook my head for some reason. Maybe I'd surprised myself. But he had come to me openly and honestly.

The phone rang and it was the chief. "Devine there?" he asked.

"He just left," I said.

A pause and a cough. "You—ah—got together, all right?"

I closed my eyes. "What do you mean, chief?"

"I sent him over," the voice went on, "to tell you that Homicide is working right with you on this Nelson business. Didn't he tell you that?"

"Why—yes he did," I answered. "I probably wasn't listening as closely as I should, but he told me that all right."

"Weren't listening—?" His voice was gruff. "What does that mean? What are you talking about? Isn't this case important enough to merit your attention, Mr. Jones?"

That *Mr. Jones* is for when he's annoyed. "It's important," I said, "and I'm working like a dog on it, chief. And I'm working with Devine." I paused. "He and I understand each other, now."

"All right," he said. "You're making

some sense." He went on with a few words about cooperation and vigilance and some other virtues he admires.

After he'd finished and hung up, I went over to open the window. The office, I thought, needed an airing.

Then I sat in my chair and thought of nothing. They all went around and around in my head, making no pattern——Tod and his sister, the count and his wife, the Coleman pair, the Greek and Mike Bradford and Devine and the waiter and even Nels Keeling, the lawyer, who hadn't phoned as yet.

So I phoned him at his office. He was there.

"I was just going to call you," he said. "What's the trouble?"

That's automatic with a lawyer, to think of trouble. I said: "You do any checking on the state's witnesses in that Nelson case?"

"Mmmm—no. They seemed disinterested enough to me. Something come up?"

I told him about Al Coleman. I asked: "Think you could get a stay of execution on that kind of information? I hate to be fighting time in this business."

He didn't think he could unless I got something a little more substantial to offer. The governor would want a recommendation from the D.A. "And Whitney and I aren't exactly lodge brothers," he finished.

I said I'd try to get something more substantial. I told him about Devine and his heart-breaking confession of possible incompetence. "The police will be working along with us now," I said, "and so will Whitney probably."

He said he was glad to hear that, but he didn't sound like he believed it. He repeated that he'd need more than I had so far before he'd start any action for a stay.

A careful, conservative lawyer, Nels Keeling. Probably a very good man for probate work.

It was nearly five o'clock and all I'd had for the day's labor was some suspicion regarding the honesty of Al Coleman.

I went out to eat, but not at Mac's. I wanted to see that waiter anyway, and I could eat at the restaurant. It was less than a block away from the apartment where the Abbott-Terrati-Theosophulus girl had lived. She hadn't gone back to her family after her last divorce; she'd lived alone.

The waiter was there and willing to talk. He was more than willing—he was eager. He'd never been this important before and the chances were he'd never be this important again. He told me all he'd heard in great detail. He told me all he'd thought with the same attention to detail. Then he took my order.

He told me the same thing Tod had told me. They'd quarreled about the count. Tod had accused her of infidelity.

I was just beginning to attack my shrimp cocktail when Nick Theosophulus walked in. He seemed startled when he saw me but headed right for my table.

"I didn't know you ate here," he said by way of greeting.

"First time," I said. "You eat here often, Nick?"

He pulled out the chair across from mine, and sat down. "Often enough. Lila and I used to come here all the time. Just—habit I guess." He picked up my menu. "You getting anywhere on that business?"

"Not very far."

He shook his head. "You haven't got much time."

I had four days, after tonight. And there was nowhere I could think of to go tonight. I'd checked everything there was to check and had seen everyone there was to see.

Before turning in I went down to headquarters. And learned that Glen Harvey wasn't tailing Al Coleman. He'd never found him; Al was missing.

That was Thursday night.

They didn't find him Friday though they were combing the town. They had his wife down at headquarters and I was there when they grilled her. She knew nothing about where he had gone. She said she was worried about him. But she didn't look worried to me.

Friday afternoon I talked to Joan

again. She was a little more weary, but no less determined. The very fact that Al was missing seemed a good omen to her. Nels Keeling thought he had enough for a stay of execution now. But the governor didn't agree.

Friday night I went out to talk to Mrs. Coleman. Perhaps she'd tell me something she'd be afraid to tell the police. She wouldn't talk to me at all.

Friday night I didn't sleep so well.

Saturday, Jack Elder called and he had the story about the count's conversion. The count followed the party line like a true comrade. He told me how it came about that the count had been shown the light. He said he'd bill me for the research.

I WENT over to see the count. He didn't seem surprised to see me. He was home alone and he ushered me in like an old friend. He was smooth, all right.

When we were seated in the studio living room, I fired the opening gun. I said: "I've been wondering, Count Terrati, if this could have been a—a *political* murder."

He considered that, chewing his lower lip reflectively. Then he said: "I don't follow you, Mr. Jones."

"As a threat," I went on, "to you. As a warning that your recent conversion to a—a liberal viewpoint wasn't acceptable to your former friends."

He was watching me now. He wasn't taking his eyes off of me for a second. "Are you saying that Lila may have died as a result of some beliefs I hold? Aren't you being ridiculous?"

"I'm trying not to be. But I'm overlooking nothing. A blow at her would be a blow a you, wouldn't it? She still meant a lot to you."

"We were friends if that's what you mean. We were civilized people, Mr. Jones, and the separation was mutually agreeable. But there wasn't any of the —affection you infer."

"The night Lila died," I said, "she and Tod were quarreling about *you*."

He smiled. "Am I to be responsible for a jealous man's hallucinations?"

"He must have had some reason to be jealous."

Again he smiled. "It has been my experience that reason or knowledge aren't necessary for jealousy. It's a sickness, Mr. Jones. It's unreasonable and misleading. You aren't trying to involve me in this mess because of a jealous man's accusations, are you?"

"I'm not trying to do anything but find a murderer," I said. "I thought you'd be willing to help me, in that."

He shrugged. "If I could have helped I would have before the trial." He paused. "You seem to have investigated my background rather thoroughly, Mr. Jones."

"That's right. But don't mistake my motives. I'm not on a witch hunt. Your beliefs are your business. My job isn't concerned with that unless it helps to solve a murder. I'm a private investigator, not a Congressional committee."

"I see. And where did you get all this misinformation?"

I heard a door open, and close. I heard footsteps. I said: "It took some digging. It isn't too generally known. I wouldn't worry about it."

The countess was in the room looking composed and lovely. Looking a bit annoyed when she saw me.

Count Terrati said: "Mr. Jones has been accusing me of infidelity, darling."

She smiled at me, a smile as phoney as a lead dollar. "You meant mental infidelity, no doubt? I keep a very close watch on my attractive husband, Mr. Jones. But I can't stop his dreaming."

I said: "The count has misquoted me. A lot of other people have accused him of infidelity. I merely repeated what I'd heard."

Neither of them seemed as poised as they'd been a moment before. The count regained his first. He said quietly: "Mr. Jones has also been investigating my —political leanings. I'm not sure he approves."

"I didn't say that," I objected. "I'm a liberal, myself."

They both smiled then and looked at each other. I felt like a canary between two cats.

The count said: "Very commendable, Mr. Jones. We'll have to get together on that. But some other time, I'm afraid. We're leaving in a few minutes to spend a week-end in the country."

There wasn't anything I could do about that, except to say good-bye. I had no authority, no evidence. I had nothing but the mentally bruised feeling of having achieved nothing. I left them.

The Dusy growled as I started her and coughed as I eased out from the curb. She seemed unhappy.

I went down to Headquarters. On the way I drove past the Sports Bowl. There on a wall was a poster of Nick Theosophulus in all his half-naked glory. "*The Greek God,*" the poster read, "*versus Moose Mulligan. Two out of three falls.*"

Devine and Harvey were coming down the concrete steps as I pulled up in front of Headquarters. They saw me and came directly over. Devine said: "We've just got a call. You can come along if you want."

I got out as Glen Harvey added: "A couple of kids found Coleman—out on Atkinson and Hubbard." We were walking toward the department car. "An empty lot. Knife in his throat. He's been dead for some time, I guess."

Glen drove. There was no dialogue on the way. Devine looked worried, but he had a right to look worried. The Nelson case was blowing up in his face.

It was a corner lot, high with weeds, littered with junk. It was in a more or less deserted section of town, comprising a few run-down dwellings and a deserted warehouse. This lot had formerly been used for parking the way it looked, for there was a break in the curb and a gravel driveway now thickly spotted with weeds.

AL COLEMAN lay near the end of the gravel, his eyes open, his face slack. The eyes seemed to be surprised. There was a darkness staining his shirt, a darkness that had once been the color of blood. Doc Waters was bending over the body when we got there.

Out on the sidewalk two uniformed policemen were keeping a gang of boys and a few adults off the lot.

Devine said: "How long, doc?"

"Can't tell right away. More than a day."

The internes were coming with the stretcher. Devine looked at me and away. Glen said: "It looks as though you were right about Coleman, Jonesy."

There was no satisfaction in that, for what Al knew had died with him. We had no lead at all now. I walked back along the gravel, looking for a spot of mud, anything that would show tire tracks. There was nothing.

Devine walked along with me. He said: "Now that he's dead, maybe that wife of his will chirp. She's got nothing to hide now. Let's go over there."

The three of us drove over to Vine, to the duplex of the Widow Coleman. She was out in the front when we got there, sunning the baby in his buggy and sitting on the porch reading a magazine.

Devine said: "Let me do the talking."

The three of us went up onto the porch, Glen and I well in the rear. But not far enough back so we couldn't hear Devine say: "We've found your husband, Mrs. Coleman."

She must have guessed immediately. For her face drained of its color; the magazine dropped to the floor. She took a deep breath and tried to say something. She put a hand on the porch railing.

"He was stabbed to death," Devine said.

She started to sway on her chair and Glen moved past me. He caught her as she toppled.

Tactful, thoughtful Devine . . . and he'd known her husband.

I went through the open doorway and up into the kitchen. I was ready with a glass of water when she opened her eyes again.

She talked after a while. She'd been expecting something bad to happen. Al had been acting so strangely the past year, staying away from home on his nights off, talking so queerly.

She was near hysterics, talking, talking, talking—and saying nothing. She

told about the money he'd said he'd won in a poker game, the money he'd used for the car. That was right before the trial and she knew he'd been lying about the poker game.

After a while, Glen and I went down to the car.

Something was digging at my mind, screaming to be recognized, but it wouldn't break through to the surface. In her words there'd been a tie-up, but I didn't see it, not then.

Devine came down to the car after a few minutes, and we started back to the station. Devine stared out the window saying nothing.

Then, just before we stopped in front of headquarters, he said: "What have we got that we didn't have before? What have we got but another murder?"

"And I was going on vacation next week," Harvey said. "I suppose this'll crack it wide open again."

"You mean the Nelson case?" Devine said.

Glen was pulling up to the curb. "That's right."

"I don't see it," Devine said. "We'd need more than this to take to the governor."

I didn't say anything. Under the new love-Devine policy, I was avoiding arguments. We went in and down the hall to Devine's office. The personal effects of the late Al Coleman were on his desk in there in a big envelope.

Devine went through them methodically, one by one. A ring of keys, some change, a ring, a cheap cigarette lighter, a wallet. He went through the wallet.

He smiled when he came across the card. He said: "No wonder Al's changed. No wonder he was away from home on his nights off." He tossed it over to me, and I read it.

It was a membership card in the Communist party.

That's what had been buzzing around my brain. That's the tie-up I'd been looking for right along.

I said: "Maybe this case is wide-open again."

"How do you figure that?" Devine asked.

I told him about the count.

"Let's get him," he said. "Let's bring him down and work him over. I never did like that jerk; he was too smooth."

"He's out of town," I said, "for the weekend."

"How long's that?" Glen asked. "How long's a weekend?"

"Some of them end on Sunday night," I said, "and some on Monday."

"We'll put a man on his apartment," Devine said. "We'll get him the second he comes home."

"Tod goes to the chair on Monday," I said, "unless Whiney asks for a stay on this information."

"I'll see," Devine said. "I'll talk to him. Glen, send Schultz over to that apartment right away. Maybe they haven't left. If they have, tell him to wait there until he's relieved."

After checking with the technical men with Doc and with the Chief, I went back to the office and phoned Joan Nelson. I told her what had happened.

"But," I finished, "nothing's settled, yet. We haven't got a shred of evidence besides the tie-up. No prints on the knife, no witnesses that saw anything strange, not a damned thing. And don't tell this to anybody. We're keeping it from the papers, too, for the time being."

"Everything's going to be all right," she said. "I know it, I know it—"

I was almost sorry I'd told her. For everything wasn't all right, not by a long, long way. Going up against the count was a man's work, getting anything out of him he didn't want to reveal was something for Superman.

I HAD my thoughts on the matter, my own private unshared thoughts. Properly worded, properly presented, maybe it would work. Maybe and maybe not. I feared Devine's heavy hand though, and it was Devine's case. If he would listen to reason . . .

It didn't sound like reason to him when I phoned him. It sounded like I was trying to take the play away from him. "We'll talk about it, tomorrow," he said. "I've had a bellyfull today."

I went home and tried to sleep. It was

tough work. After a pint of rye, I managed it. But even then there were dreams.

Sunday morning was a bad morning, windy, wet and dark. I fried an egg and made some coffee. I took a shower.

It was while I was taking the shower I began to wonder if it was just a weekend the count was on. Maybe he'd left town for good. Maybe things were getting too hot. I had to depend on his ego, on his belief that nothing could come up he couldn't handle.

I went down to the station and Devine was there. He said: "We'll take the evening shift over there. I'm waiting here for the call until then."

He puts in enough time, I'll say that for him. He isn't afraid of work. He's too fast and too careless and too apt to jump at an innocent conclusion, but he surely puts in the hours.

I said: "How about Whitney? Did you talk to him?"

Devine looked at the floor. "He—doesn't think we've got anything."

"How about the chief? He's got some weight?"

"He doesn't want to buck Whitney."

I didn't say any more about that. I went down to the press room. There was a game going and I got into it. I couldn't make a dime. My luck was sour. I hoped it wasn't symbolic. Luck was what I was going to need.

We ate some sandwiches right there for lunch and had some coffee. My luck never changed.

Around supper time Devine came in. He said: "We may as well wait out there as here. I'm getting fed up with this place."

We went out and the rain had stopped. But it was still damp and dark and windy. Devine drove making time. He was nervous and jumpy.

I said: "Have you thought over what I asked you last night?"

"Yup. We'll play it that way until I think you're on the wrong track. Then we'll play it my way."

I said: "If you crack this, they'll forget about the other."

He didn't answer. He didn't even act like he'd heard me, but I knew he had.

We waited about a half block back from the entrance after sending Glen Harvey home.

It wasn't very entertaining sitting in the car with a man I'd never liked and who'd never liked me. There wasn't much we had to talk about, but it still wasn't boring.

Time passed slowly. Once we had a false alarm—a couple that looked like them, and that gave us some excitement for the moment. But they were a pair of innocents.

We'd been waiting three hours by my watch and three weeks by my imagination when they came walking up the sidewalk toward the apartment entrance. The countess was clinging to his arm and they were laughing about something. They looked like a pair of distinguished and carefree sweethearts.

We gave them ten minutes and then went in and up.

It was the count who opened the door. He saw me and smiled. He saw Devine and frowned. He said: "What is it this time?"

"A murder," I said. "A different kind of murder. A knife, this time."

Nothing on his face, nothing. "Well—? Does it concern me?"

"He was carrying the card," I said. "I thought you might know him. Man named Coleman, Al Coleman. He was the principal witness in the Nelson case."

Something in his eyes, now. Puzzlement? Wonder? "Come in," he said.

We went in to the vast modern living room again. The countess was in there smoking a cigarette standing near one of the high windows. The count said to her: "Al Coleman's been murdered, dear."

She turned to face us. Nothing in her face either. "That's too bad. Was it because of—of that business, you think?"

"We think it was."

There was something on the count's face, something hard to define. It looked like he was groping for something, trying not to believe where his mind was leading him. Then I thought I saw shock there. He said: "Sit down, gentlemen."

We sat down and I said: "We figure

that Al was bribed to tell what he did about Tod Nelson. We couldn't figure who did the bribing. Anyway, the person who did began to fear that Al might crack. If Al cracked, the case against Tod cracked. Maybe Al was doing a little blackmailing, too. For one of those two reasons or both, he died."

THE count's face was stone-cold now, and stone-hard. He'd seen the picture. He'd loved her—they'd all loved her. She must have been some girl.

He put his face in his hands, and then took his hands away. He said: "You think it might be a 'political killin',' as you call it. Is that the reason you're here?"

"It's no political killing," I said. "You know that. Politics is the tie-up, but it's no political killing. But unless we get the murderer, it'll be a political mess. That would bring the F.B.I. in. That would be very, very bad for you—and for the party."

The countess said evenly: "I can't follow this. Are you trying to implicate my husband in this latest killing, too, Mr. Jones?"

"Not unless he wants it that way," I said.

She was looking at the count now and he at her. She must have read what was in his eyes for her poise was cracking. She said: "They're trying to trick you, Anthony. They're trying their best to turn you—"

Devine hadn't said a word, but he wasn't missing a word either.

I said: "You gave me quite a lecture on jealousy the last time I was here. You know about that, don't you, at first hand? You live with it."

The countess' voice was higher now. "It's persecution, Anthony. It's capitalistic trickery—"

I said: "Your wife converted you to the cause, didn't she, count? Surely she wouldn't want the party involved in her own jealous crime. She wouldn't want the party to suffer because *she'd* killed your former wife and then used Al Coleman to frame Tod Nelson. She hasn't got any protection coming after killing a loyal worker like Al."

There was the damndest smile on his face now, an unholy smile. He said: "You can believe, gentleman, that this comes as a complete surprise to me. But you've done a clever job, Mr. Jones, and I see the picture now." He turned to his wife. "Wouldn't it be better to confess, dear, and save the party embarrassment? They'll uncover it all. It's merely a matter of time."

The shock was on her face. She was standing near a long library table and she put a hand on that to support herself. "Anthony—" she said, and closed her eyes.

There was some viciousness in his smile. Maybe he was remembering Lila Abbott and what she'd always been to him.

His voice was dead as he threw the countess to the wolves. "It would be better for you to confess, dear. It would save me the unpleasantness of showing them that glove you neglected to destroy, that glove with the blood on it. It's Al's blood, isn't it, dear?"

She tried to say something now and then her hand was fumbling in the drawer of the table in front of her.

I started to rise and so did Devine, for she was holding a gun very steadily in her right hand now. It was pointed at the count.

She put three fast shots into him befor Devine could come up on her from the side. She toppled before Devine got to her.

The count died with that same damned smile on his face.

The glove and a little work-out in Devine's room were enough to break her down. She was going to be nailed for killing the count, anyway; the others probably wouldn't hurt her very much more.

Devine got to Whitney and Whitney got to the governor. Mortimer Jones got a nice check and a kiss from Joan Nelson. The kiss was almost as nice as the check.

Tod never fought again. His fight was gone, buried with Lila Abbott.

He steadied the gun and fired as fast as he could.

KILLER COME HOME

By CURT HAMLIN

Most men expect their wives to nag once in a while and they learn to ignore it. John Teel was no exception till the night Martha said just ONE wrong word—and that was murder!

JOHN TEEL had never thought of murder. Objectively or otherwise. He was a commonplace little man. Dumpy, middle-aged, untidy, with a reddish nose and blue veins lining his rather puffy face. He'd been married sixteen years. His wife's name was Martha. She was thirty-eight. John Teel thought she was very good-looking. He was in love with her.

He worked late that night. It wasn't unusual. He worked nights a great deal. At four he called his wife and told her he wouldn't be home for dinner. There was the usual mild wrangle over the telephone, the usual old arguments trotted out like weary ponies in a children's riding circle. Teel heard them through. He hung up, sighing.

At six he left the office, ate in a Washington Street cafeteria, read the evening paper over his coffee, and went back to work. It was a little after ten when he closed the office door and let the elevator carry him down to the street. He was tired.

Standing on the corner, he waited for his bus. Except for the weariness, and a certain vague fear that his wife would be angry because he was so late, he felt nothing. Even the cold, once he was used to it, was pleasantly invigorating. The glassy streets glittered cheerfully with the reflections of street lamps, headlights, and the yellowish cast of display windows. When the bus came he climbed aboard, took a seat at the back, loosened his coat, and wished he could smoke.

He got off at the corner of 15th and Broadway. He was five blocks from home. He decided to stop in at the Owl Tavern for a glass of beer.

He wondered afterwards if stopping in for the beer had made any difference, and decided it hadn't. What happened would have happened anyway, though of course he didn't know it at the time. He saw the black sedan parked near the corner, glanced sideways at the two men sitting in it, paid them no attention. When he went into the tavern the bartender said: "Evening. The usual, Mr. Teel?"

He said he wanted the usual and hoisted himself heavily onto a stool. The beer tasted faintly bitter and green, but he drank it with relish, sucking cool suds from the lip of the glass and letting the liquid slide easily down his throat.

Aside from the bartender, the only person he knew in the place was Ed Hurley. Ed was playing Barrelball with a fat blonde in a pink dress and a tall man who wore a derby. The blonde squealed every time she made a shot and the man in the derby kept patting her encouragingly on the hip. Ed finished his game and came over to shake hands with Mr. Teel. He had his coat off and there were droplets of sweat on his nose and beading his upper lip. He said to drink up and he'd buy. Mr. Teel shook his head. "One's my limit, Ed."

"Better stick around a little and I'll run you home. Got my car outside."

"Thanks anyway. I'll walk. It's just a short way."

"Five blocks is a long way in the rain."

Mr. Teel said it wasn't really raining hard, only misting. "Besides," he said, "I need the air. Clear my head up. I'll sleep better."

He shook hands again, watched the blonde's hips wobble as she rolled a ball, and returned to the street. He was grinning. The black sedan with the two men in it still stood by the curb. He passed it without looking up.

He was in the middle of the third block before he realized the car was following him.

He wasn't frightened. Just mildly curious. He stopped at a corner to wait for it to pass. It didn't pass. It swooped suddenly into the curb beside him and a man got out. He was a big man. He wore an overcoat and a hat with the brim pulled low over his forehead. He stood very close and talked from one corner of his mouth. His breath was slightly sour.

"Teel?"

Mr. Teel backed off slightly. He didn't answer.

"Are you John Teel?"

Mr. Teel's heart was too big for his chest. He said, very carefully: "No."

"You're a damned liar."

Mr. Teel said nothing.

"Get into the car."

His throat was dry. He coughed. He didn't move.

The man in the overcoat grinned. Not pleasantly. His hand came from behind him. There was a gun in it. It was a big gun, but the size of his hand made it small. Small, but no less deadly. He

said: "Get it, Fatso? It's for you. Get in the car."

Mr. Teel moved, slowly and carefully, toward the curb.

They opened a rear door for him. That gave him the opportunity to slide his billfold from his hip pocket and drop it into the gutter. He climbed into the rear seat, moving mechanically, and the man in the overcoat climbed in after him and shut the door. The car slid out into the street. It turned west, went a block, turned south.

Mr. Teel was thinking about the billfold. There was fifty dollars in it. With luck, he'd get it back. He did not feel too worried.

The driver was smoking a cigarette. He flipped it outside and rolled up the door window. He said: "Colder than a penguin's pants."

The man in the overcoat chuckled. "Not where Fatso's going."

"You sure he's the right guy?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"You better be pretty damned sure."

"I said I was sure, didn't I?" The gun prodded painfully into Mr. Teel's ribs. "Your name's Teel, ain't it, Fatso?"

Mr. Teel shook his head. "No."

The driver chuckled and coughed. He spat out the window and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his coat. "You got to do better'n that, Louie."

"Don't be so damned smart. You don't think he'd tell us, do you?"

"Don't get mad, Louie."

Louie said, sulkily: "Then don't be so damned smart."

The driver moved his shoulders. Mr. Teel was listening. He was puzzled. Something was creeping on cold, uncertain feet into the middle of his stomach. He cleared his throat. "This man. This Teel. Just exactly what do you want with him?"

It was the driver who answered. "We got some business with him."

Louie said: "Shut up, Sixes."

"If this guy's Teel I don't see what difference it makes."

"I ain't so sure he is Teel."

"You said you was sure."

"Shut up."

Mr. Teel said suddenly: "I haven't any money with me, anyway."

Sixes began to laugh. It was a low, husky laugh, like his voice. It ended in a fit of coughing. Louie told him to shut up. To Mr. Teel, he said: "We ain't looking for money, Fatso. The job's all paid for."

"Job?"

"Sure. What we're going to do . . ."

Louie was smirking through the darkness that shrouded the back seat. A small drop of salty water ran coldly down Mr. Teel's forehead and dropped from his nose. He was afraid. Terribly. He swallowed. The effort hurt his throat. He said nothing.

Louie lit a cigarette. The car turned south again. In the front seat, Sixes was shaking his head. "We got to know if he's the right guy, Louie. We don't get paid for no mistake."

Louie's voice was angry. "O.K., wise guy. So maybe you got a idea how we can find out?"

"Sure I got a idea."

"O.K. So you got an idea. So what is it?"

"He's got a billfold, ain't he? How about it, Fatso? You got a billfold?"

Mr. Teel said he had no billfold. He said it very weakly.

Sixes said: "Frisk the jerk, Louie. Sure he's got a billfold."

Louie's hand moved roughly over Mr. Teel—his left hand. In his right he still held the gun. It took a little time to check all the pockets. When he was done, Louie began to say unpleasant things in a low, obscene monotone. "He ain't got one."

Mr. Teel said: "I told you that."

"Shut up, Fatso." Louie slapped Mr. Teel across the face with the barrel of the gun.

From the front seat Sixes said: "Temper, temper." He said it in a high, schoolteacherish tone. He giggled.

"That goes for you, too, Sixes."

"It was a idea, anyway."

"It sure was."

"Maybe you got a better one?"

"Sure."

"Sure I got a better one."

Mr. Teel said faintly: "Oh, God." He put his face in his hands. He was sick on the floor of the car.

Sixes said: "You going to keep this idea to yourself, or you going to tell me about it?"

"I'm telling you." Louie was almost shouting. "You shut up and I'll tell you. We take this guy to the other guy. If he says this guy is Teel, why, we'll do the job."

Sixes began to laugh again. "He's sure going to like that."

"Shut up."

"He's sure going to like us bringing this guy around. He's going to like that a lot."

"Shut up and get going."

"He's really going to be happy with us."

"I told you to get going."

"Sure. I'll get going."

Sixes drove the car around a block, headed back south. Mr. Teel straightened. He lay back weakly in his corner of the rear seat. He said he wasn't Teel. Not Teel. Somebody else. Louie told him to shut up. He was bending down, looking at the car floor. To Sixes, he said: "You better give me another clean handkerchief. The guy just shot all his cookies."

It was just an ordinary white house. A lawn. Shrubs. A rose bed in one corner. Sixes halted the sedan at the curb and climbed out. Mr. Teel climbed out. Louie climbed out. He was still holding the gun. They went up the walk abreast, with Mr. Teel in the middle. Sixes rang the doorbell.

They waited.

A man answered the door. He was a tall man, darkly good-looking. He wore a dressing gown and a thin mustache, rather like a pencil line, on his upper lip. He said: "You damned fools." He opened the door wider. Louie and Sixes pushed Mr. Teel inside and followed him. The door closed. The man in the dressing gown said: "Go on in the other room. We can't stand here." They went into the other room.

It was nice. The rugs were thick and the furniture was new and shiny. It looked like money. Mr. Teel didn't like it. He sat on the davenport, quickly, because his knees were weak. Behind him he heard Sixes say: "I told you he'd be happy to see us."

"Shut up."

The man in the dressing gown crossed in front of Mr. Teel, opened a liquor cabinet, poured himself a drink, replaced the bottle. He said with a low viciousness: "Why bring him here?"

"We had a problem." Louie fidgeted. He gestured with his meaty hands. He was standing in front of the davenport, still holding the gun. He said: "What we want to know is—is this guy Teel? Or ain't he?"

The man in the dressing gown looked at Mr. Teel carefully. Mr. Teel looked back. He'd never seen the man before in his life. He said, quite strongly: "I'm not Teel."

"You're a liar."

"I'm not Teel." Mr. Teel's lip curled stubbornly.

"I said you're a liar."

"But I'm not Teel."

Louie slapped Mr. Teel idly across the jaw with the gun. "Shut up, Fatso." He turned back to the man in the dressing gown. "Is he? Or ain't he?"

"Of course he is, you half-witted moron. Now take him out of here and get rid of him."

Mr. Teel moved convulsively. He jerked up his leg and kicked Louie as hard as he could in the groin.

The gun fell almost into his lap. He picked it up and held it in both hands. Louie was doubled like a closed knife, agony making his eyes bulge. Mr. Teel shot him through the head. It was quite simple. He placed the muzzle close to Louie's temple and pressed the trigger. Then he aimed it at Sixes. He shot twice. Sixes went to his knees, spitting blood. He was still swaying, like heavy paper in stiff wind, when Mr. Teel looked from him to the man in the dressing gown. The man was yelling. He was clawing frantically at a table drawer and screaming his lungs out. Mr. Teel steadied the gun against the back of the davenport

and shot him three times. In the middle. The man in the dressing gown sagged, still clinging to the drawer edge. Blood came out of his chest in short, red spurts. Mr. Teel rolled off the davenport and darted across the room. He hammered at the man's fingers with the butt of Louie's gun. The man let go of the piece of furniture.

There was a revolver inside the drawer. It was fully loaded. Mr. Teel took it out and threw it through the nearest window. Then he called the police.

He was sitting on the davenport staring at the three bodies when the police came. There were puddles of blood on the rug.

It took the cops a long time to get things straight. The sergeant's name was Cotton. He was big, beefy-faced, hard-headed. He kept asking Mr. Teel over and over again: "The guy's name was Shaffer. Larry Shaffer. Why'd you kill him?"

He meant the man in the dressing gown. Mr. Teel said he'd never seen the man before. He said he'd never heard of him. He said: "It was those two." He explained about Louie and Sixes.

"Them I know." said Cotton. "They got records as long as my arm. It's this guy Larry Shaffer I want to know about. If he sicked Louie and Sixes on you he must've known you. How come he wanted you rubbed?"

Mr. Teel said he didn't know. He kept saying it. He said he didn't know Larry Shaffer. He never saw Larry Shaffer before. He never heard of Larry Shaffer. After three hours, even Cotton was convinced. He told Mr. Teel he could go home. Mr. Teel went home.

A cop drove him in a patrol car. On the way, he talked about what a screwy case it was. He asked if Mr. Teel had been scared. Mr. Teel said he'd been scared as hell. The cop said: "I'll bet. I don't blame you. I would have been, too." He talked some more.

Mr. Teel didn't listen very closely. He was thinking about his wife. He was thinking that she'd be worried about him. He'd never worked this late. He looked at his watch. It was nearly two o'clock. He'd thought it was much, much later.

There was a light in the upstairs window when he got home. He thanked the cop, said goodnight, went wearily up the walk, let himself in with his key. He was very tired. He went into the hallway and hung up his hat, started to take off his coat.

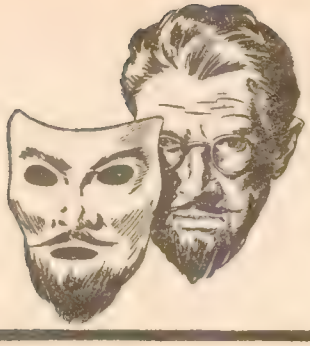
Above him, he could hear Martha moving about. He wondered what he would tell her.

She called from the head of the stairs. "Is everything all right?"

John Teel didn't answer. He was too tired to answer. He took off his coat and hung it up. She called again. He listened. Something like fire rose and exploded in John Teel's sunken chest. Still he listened. She repeated herself. She said: "Larry, did things work out all right?"

A few moments later the neighbors awoke to her screaming.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946, of Black Mask, published bi monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1947. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Black Mask, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none; Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Henry Steeger 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of October, 1947. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40. Register's No. 363-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Rev. 7-46.



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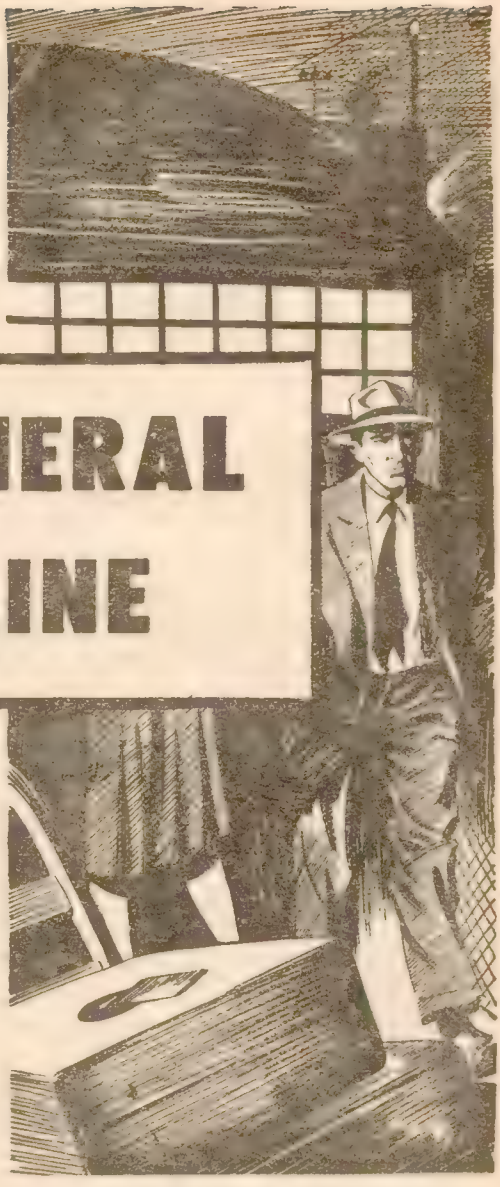

By W. LEE HERRINGTON

Albert Carlin's fake suicide was perfectly planned—note, money, motive. And then he found himself looking into his own face above the business end of an automatic.

ALBERT CARLIN pulled the heavy drapes together at the window and turned to face the man at the fireplace.

"How do you feel, Bailey?" Carlin asked. "I mean, how do you feel *inside?*"

Bailey walked to the window and stood beside the other man. He straightened Albert Carlin's necktie, flecked an imaginary bit of ash from his coat lapel and held his hand before Carlin's face. Bailey's long fingers spread out fanwise.

"Like that," he taunted. "I'm like that, inside. Steady as a rock." Bailey laughed without humor.

Carlin's mouth formed a faint sneer. "After all," he said, "I'm an amateur at this sort of thing. You're a professional."

The man put out a hand and touched his arm. Bailey swung around.

"If you're ready, then—" Bailey walked to the ornate desk in the middle of the room. "We might as well get this part over with."

He sat in the heavily upholstered chair and pressed the button recessed into the under side of the desk top. Then he leaned back comfortably and lighted a fresh cigar.

Albert Carlin's hand nervously toyed with the window drapes as he watched Bailey's movements. The minutes passed with maddening slowness and almost invisible beads of sweat blanketed Carlin's forehead. The tantalizing aroma of Bailey's cigar rode across the still air to Carlin's nostrils and when the faint footsteps sounded in the hall outside,

Carlin quickly pulled the window drapes around him and stood motionless, completely hidden.

The tiny sweat beads were gone now, chased away by the cooling breeze that came insistently through the partly opened window. It was all up to Bailey, now.

Bailey shifted his weight in the chair and looked around the room. A small fire lay in the fire place and sent long shadows flickering along the shelves and rows of books that lined the library walls. Shelf after shelf that repeated until the ceiling interfered.

Bailey let his eyes stop on the shelf that held the massive volumes of Shakespeare and the works of other authors Bailey had never read nor heard of. Bailey's interest centered on a single book. He counted the rows again. The fourth row from the bottom. The third book from the end, counting from the right.

Bailey forced his eyes away from the book as the knock sounded. It was a formal knock, a gentle tapping followed by the properly deferential pause, then the door was opened and the man stood the correct number of steps from the big desk. He stood as he had been taught a proper chauffeur should stand, his cap in his hand, his eyes indicating his readiness.

Bailey peered at the man through the dim light of the shaded desk lamp.

"Howard," he began.

"Yes, sir?"

"Howard—" Bailey's eyes totaled the correct dress of the chauffeur. The dark suit, the white shirt and dark necktie, the neatly combed hair and the uniform cap held close to the body. "Howard, you have been with me now—how long is it?"

"Seven years, sir. That is, almost seven years lacking a few months." Howard shifted his cap to his other hand and added quickly: "I hope my services have been satisfactory, sir?"

Howard's nervousness grew as he waited and vainly tried to explore the thoughts behind the eyes of the seated man. As always, Howard's thoughts brought up sharply against the almost black Vandyke beard, the deeply tanned skin and the heavily rimmed eyeglasses that hid most of the expression in the cold, icy blue eyes.

To Howard, the tailoring of the conservative business suit, the not too large knot in the necktie and the unobtrusive signet ring on the third finger of the left hand were entirely correct.

To Howard, it all added up to the proper dignity of his employer and gave him the severe touch that Howard had always, when he thought of it at all, associated with investments and bonds and banks. As usual, Howard felt the same slight nervousness he had always felt, here in the dim light of the library.

"Your services, Howard," Bailey said at last, "have been excellent. You are an excellent driver. Turn on the overhead lights, will you, Howard?"

Bailey stood up and came around the desk, his cigar held lightly in his hand as Howard flooded the room with light and faced him again.

"That's better," Bailey said quietly. "Now, take a good look at me, Howard. Would you say I looked fit enough to undertake a trip around the world? Or maybe rough it in Minnesota for a season? Or maybe take a long airplane trip?"

Howard permitted himself a few seconds of speculative appraisal and little wrinkles of pleasure twinkled around his eyes.

"If I may say so, sir, you are looking unusually fit. In fact, you are looking —I have never seen you looking better, sir."

Bailey chuckled and spoke around his fat cigar. "Damn it, Howard, I think you are a better judge than that quack doctor."

"I hope nothing is wrong, sir. I mean, closing the house and—"

Bailey pounded the desk in exultation. He waved his cigar at Howard. "I'll show that old quack. Wrong? No, nothing is wrong, Howard. In fact, everything is so right that I'm going to take a vacation."

Bailey hummed a half-remembered

tune as he took a fat wallet from his pocket and removed several bills.

"That," he said, "will take care of a couple of months' salary. The house is closed, the housekeeper is gone and I won't be needing you for a while. Give yourself a vacation. Come back in sixty days. Even take the small car if you like."

Howard said: "Thank you, sir." When he had put the money away he paused at the door. "Is there anything else? Anything I can do for you, sir, before I go?"

"Anything I have to do," Bailey said quietly, "I can do for myself. Goodnight, Howard."

Howard said: "Thank you, sir. And goodnight, Mr. Carlin." Howard closed the door behind him.

ALBERT CARLIN stepped away from the concealing drapes, dabbed a handkerchief over his dry forehead and sat down in one of the chairs that flanked the fireplace. Bailey went to the window and watched the jaunty figure of the chauffeur cross the patch of lighted driveway and disappear into the garage building. His breath came through his lips noisily in a long held sigh.

He strode to the desk and picked up the heavy, square glass decanter. It was only then that Bailey's long, tanned fingers trembled a little and there was the tiny sound of glass tinkling against glass. He drank quickly, set his glass down and carried the second glass to the man at the fireplace and sat down opposite him.

Carlin did not return Bailey's slow smile. He tossed his drink off in a single gulp. It was only in that item they seemed to differ.

It was as if each man was made of some reflecting material that mirrored the man opposite him. The clothing, the eyeglasses, the faint twist of the mouths, the dark hair and beards that were so identical as to suggest they had been trimmed from a master template. If there was a difference in their appearances it was in the little things. Like Bailey's suddenly narrowed eyes and the tightness around his mouth and the peculiar way Bailey had of tugging at his beard.

And the way Albert Carlin suddenly dashed his empty glass into the fireplace, leaned back, and slapped his knee with his open hand.

"It worked!" Carlin gloated. "My own driver called you 'Carlin.'" He paused and mopped again at an already feverishly dry forehead. "A year is a hell of a long time, Bailey. I'm going to miss you."

"I'm sure you will," Bailey agreed amiably.

"Yes," Carlin continued. "In this last year I have grown quite fond of you. I almost wish you were coming along with me. But I'll be thinking of you all the time I am enjoying myself in Mexico—or perhaps South America—knowing you are back here, slaving away impersonating me."

Bailey sighed. "I guess there isn't any other way." He watched Carlin put a hand under his coat and rub his stomach as if the hot liquor had warmed him inside.

"Not when it involves a beautiful blonde who has money," Carlin admitted. "And a jealous husband she wants to run away from." He laughed shortly. "I'm almost tempted to try out your impersonation on her again."

"No more of that," Bailey snapped. "I agreed to stand here in this room and have that eagle-eyed Howard look me over in bright light. All right. Howard passed me as being you—Albert Carlin. What more do you want?"

"You think I am getting the best of it," Carlin said. "Look, man, you'll be drawing a salary of eighteen thousand dollars a year as Albert Carlin. Be reasonable. A year ago you were just a fugitive from the police."

Bailey said softly: "I have wished at times that you had called the cops the night you caught me robbing your house."

"I was too surprised. For a moment, I saw myself standing there. The way I would have looked without a beard. I

was actually too startled at first and then the idea came to me."

"You are damned clever, Carlin," Bailey admitted. "And patient. Few men would spend a year perfecting an impersonation."

"Time means nothing to me, Bailey. This had to be right. The jails and graveyards are full of clever people who were careless. The little things about me that you couldn't master, I changed in myself and became like you. That was why I even tested you against Annabelle. Well," Carlin pressed a hand against his stomach again, "well, she will be expecting me pretty soon now. You're clever too, Bailey."

"Yes, we *are* clever, aren't we?"

"Our own mothers couldn't tell us apart." Carlin slapped at his knee again.

"Nor Annabelle."

"Annabelle? What about Annabelle?"

"Women are peculiar," Bailey said. "But you're clever so you know that. You know that you start giving them presents and they expect them. Tonight is your big night. You're going to run off with the beautiful blonde whose husband won't give her a divorce." There was a hint of contempt in Bailey's voice. "There should be a little celebration. You'd better have a present for Annabelle. Maybe perfume. Anything. Just a little something for Annabelle."

"Oh, I've not forgotten that." Carlin smiled.

BAILEY put his hands into his coat pockets and stood with his feet apart. Carlin leaned forward in his chair, tugging at the edge of his beard in the gesture he had learned because it was a habit his double couldn't break.

"I'll miss you, Bailey," he repeated. "Like leaving my own self here. Talk about being birds of a feather."

"And flocking together," Bailey said softly. "When we're so damned different."

"What do you mean?" Carlin frowned at the quiet menace in Bailey's tone.

"Oh, take being careful for instance. You keep your thirty-eight automatic under your coat where you can't draw fast. Mine is in my coat pocket."

Carlin whitened, his body stiffened as Bailey brought out the gun.

He said: "Now, wait a minute, Bailey."

"What a guy won't do for a dame!" Bailey came closer to Carlin. "How do *you* feel, Carlin? I mean—how do you feel *inside?*"

Carlin pushed back in his chair, his eyes wide behind the thick glasses, no longer icy.

"Wait a minute, Bailey. You—you don't understand."

"I'd have to be as thick as a prison wall not to understand. You'll be miles away. Instead of me going to the office Monday as Albert Carlin, I'll be lying here on the floor, dead. And Monday, or whenever they get around to it, they will look for Albert Carlin. And I'll be Albert Carlin. Suicide."

"Don't be a fool, Bailey," Carlin blustered.

"How far back did you plan it that way?" Bailey asked savagely. "All the way? Or did you ever intend to take Annabelle with you when you faded out with the firm's money? Were you going to give both of us—me and the girl—the heave?"

"You—you don't understand."

"You should have yelled for the cops, Carlin, a year ago. Yelled loud and long and let them take me away. We could never have got away with it anyway, Carlin. Not with a dame in the picture."

The identical appearance of the finance company executive and the escaped convict began to end then. Not slowly, as it had begun, but swiftly.

The single gunshot didn't make much noise in the musty library. Most of the sound was deadened among the rows of books. The only other sound in the room was Bailey's rapid breathing. And outside, the sound of a small car going down the driveway.

Bailey worked quickly. He removed Albert Carlin's gun from where it was hopelessly tangled in his shirt front. He put Carlin's gun in his own pocket and removed the magazine from his own gun, jacked the cartridge out of the chamber

and carefully wiped all traces of fingerprints from the gun, the cartridges and the magazine.

He knelt by Carlin's body. It was more difficult than Bailey had pictured it in his mind; to make Carlin's still warm fingers push the cartridges into the magazine, push the magazine into the gun. He had to hold the butt of the gun in his own firm grasp as he fixed Carlin's right hand over the carriage, squeezed it hard, pulling the carriage back, then letting it slide forward carrying a cartridge into the chamber.

There must be no traces of his own fingerprints left on the gun, Bailey repeated over and over to himself. No traces to link him up with Carlin's death. Of course, there could be no way of tying him to Carlin but, as Carlin had said, the graveyards and jails are full of clever and careless people. He wiped his own prints from the gun butt.

A pencil in the end of the gun barrel, the safety on, made it easy to wrap Carlin's hand around the gun. And when Bailey was quite sure he had made a good job of it, he brought Carlin's thumb up, forced it to lower the safety. Bailey was perspiring when he stood up.

He sighed in honest relief as he analyzed his movements. Then he wiped his own prints from the desk and put the glass he had drunk from into his coat pocket. With the heel of his hand, Bailey blurred the prints on the glass decanter and went to the shelf of books he had never read.

He removed the big book from the fourth shelf and from the recess behind it, he brought out the little black box. It was no bigger than a stamp box, or a petty cash box; just large enough to hold a few bonds and a flat package of banded banknotes. The bills were of varying denominations. The single sheet of paper had been folded twice. It read:

> I, Albert Carlin, being of sound mind, declare this to be my last and final act. I am taking my own life because I cannot face investigation of my business accounts and because I cannot hope to make restitution.
>
> Albert Carlin

BAILEY let the sweat run unheeded down over his nose and onto his lips as he pondered the narrow margin of a single day. Early this morning, he had discovered the box. Bailey had known it was somewhere in the library. And when he had also found the note, already prepared by Albert Carlin, he had read it and replaced it. Of course, the note had changed things but then, if it was to be Carlin, or Bailey, there wasn't really much choice.

He snuggled the black box under his coat, against his ribs, placed the folded note close to Carlin's left hand and gave the whole scene a quick, parting glance.

He closed the big house behind him, locked the front door and carried the key in his hand. A block down the street, he threw the key into a sewer opening and several blocks away he crossed through a park, walked across a small swinging bridge over a tiny lake. The gun and the whiskey glass went into the lake and Bailey said softly: "Goodnight, Mr. Carlin." He pulled nervously at the black beard.

When he reached the lighted area around the park, he took another flat key from his pocket and held it in his hand until it was warm. The key to Annabelle's apartment. He remembered the first time he had seen Annabelle.

It had been another of Carlin's ideas. To test their impersonation on Annabelle by sending Bailey in his place.

Annabelle stood on the bottom step of the apartment building as Carlin had said she would be. The pattern had been the same for the past three months. Every Tuesday and Friday, she waited on the steps for Albert Carlin and the cream colored coupe.

Today was not different from the other days nor did the pattern change. The coupe stopped and the door swung open. Annabelle got into the car and leaned back against the cushions.

The pattern was the same. She said: "Hello, Albert."

Bailey relaxed inwardly, leaned across her body and pulled the car door shut. Her breath was warm on his face.

"Hello, Annabelle," he said. "Nice

perfume you're wearing today. Did I give it to you?"

"Can't you remember?" Annabelle looked into the icy blue eyes as if she were seeing into them for the first time. "Just another of the nice things you gave me, Albert."

Bailey put his hands on the steering wheel and his foot stirred the car into motion. Annabelle half turned her body toward Bailey.

"Albert," she said. "I've been thinking."

Bailey laughed. "Too dry to think. We'll go to the usual place and have a drink."

"And have the usual kind of dinner? And dance the usual steps to the usual kind of music? Albert, that is what I want to talk to you about. Things are getting to be just 'usual' with you and me."

"Later." Bailey drove the coupe carefully and faster and held his lips against his teeth until he pulled the car onto a narrower road. A little farther along the road he stopped the car.

That was how Bailey had met Annabelle for the first time. It was not the only time.

She was silent until they were inside the tavern. Under the influence of the dim lighting and the music from the juke box she brightened when Bailey sat down across from her in the incredibly small both. She put a hand on his hand and said: "Just a small one."

Bailey ordered the drinks and hummed to himself. He asked: "Dance?" He stood up, reached for her as she came to her feet. When he had taken her around the small floor several times, the music ended and he followed her back to the table, admiring the smooth cat-like litheness and the way she held her shoulders. They sat down and when the drinks came, she watched him while he sipped his drink. When the music began again, she was on her feet. She came into his arms and twice she leaned a little away from him, searching his cold blue eyes.

Bailey said: "Hungry?"

Annabelle shook her head and held his hand tighter as they walked back to the table. She remained standing, reaching for her bag and gloves.

"Let's get out of here. Let's go back to the apartment, Albert. I've been saving a bottle of wine for an afternoon like this." She paused, eyed him speculatively and said: "Do you like sparkling Burgundy, Albert?"

Bailey sucked in his breath. Damn Carlin and his clever ideas. Bailey didn't know how he, as Albert Carlin, was supposed to feel about Burgundy. He did know he would be much relieved when the afternoon was gone.

Bailey said warily: "Burgundy? Oh, I'm never quite sure."

On the way back to the city, Annabelle sat a little closer to him than before. When she came out of the small apartment kitchen with the wine bottle and the glasses, she set them down and turned on the radio. She moved the switch to set the automatic record changer into operation while Bailey struggled with the wine cork.

The cork was noisy but the bottle was cold. They drank through the first record and the second was a dreamy, soft waltz. There wasn't much volume and when the music reached the few measures that let the English horn come through for a moment, Bailey put his arm around Annabelle's waist and they began dancing. Again, she leaned away from him a little, probing his icy eyes.

BAILEY stopped dancing. He lowered her right hand and his left hand went around her as he bent toward her. She was tall enough so he didn't have to lower his head but slightly as he kissed her fiercely. When he had released her, Annabelle slid from his grasp and poured wine in Bailey's glass. She sat down.

She raised her glass to her lips, lowered it and looked at him with half-closed eyes. She said simply: "Who are you?"

"I don't get it," Bailey retorted. He got it well enough and damn Carlin again for taking Annabelle for a fool.

"You get it," Annabelle told him sharply. "You are not Albert Carlin."

Bailey finished his drink. He set the glass down, wiped his mouth with his handkerchief and smiled.

"I might as well be going then."

"Who are you?" Annabelle demanded.

"If I'm not Albert Carlin, there's nothing here for me." Bailey smiled again.

"There's this." She stood up and kissed him lightly, quickly. "There might always be this—and wine. Who are you?"

"All right. I'm not Albert Carlin. Just where I failed to put the act over, I'm not sure. Want to tell me? I'll have to tell Carlin all about this, you know."

"Tell him how to kiss a girl, then. He has never learned." She smiled in sudden companionship. "Tell him whatever the gag is, he should have cut me in on it. After all, this is the last bottle of wine."

Bailey reached for his hat.

Annabelle added: "It isn't Carlin's wine, you know." She poured more wine for Bailey. "Why are you impersonating Albert Carlin? It's a good act and you'll fool most people. But why?"

Bailey knew a minute of indecision and almost panic. All the planning that had gone into the past year could be destroyed by this woman if she liked. Damn Albert Carlin.

He said roughly: "Don't bother with the innocent act, baby. You and Carlin planned it this way. The jealous husband in the background, the beautiful woman with dough, Mexico, South America, fun, while I wash and dry the dishes down at the office."

"What husband? What money and what about Mexico and South America and fun? Is that part of the gag?"

"Now it's my turn," Bailey said. "Are you trying to tell me you are not planning to scram out with Carlin? That you are not running away from a husband?"

"If I had a husband, I might run away from him. I might run to Mexico and I might even run with Albert. Except that I don't have a husband and this is the first I've heard about Albert going to Mexico." She moved her hand in a gesture of dismissal. "If he wants to go to Mexico, let him. If he wants to train some big, handsome brute to impersonate him while he leaves the country for some reason, let him. I won't miss him."

"Then I might as well arrange things with Carlin. So he will understand."

Annabelle stretched luxuriously. "Be sure he understands the right things. Imagine little Annabelle running away with a rich banker." She squeezed Bailey's arm. "I'd like it this way a lot better. We could go a long way together. You like it this way a little better, too . . . ?"

Bailey had liked it that way too, for another two weeks. In that two weeks, he had seen Annabelle often but never as Albert Carlin, always as himself. He told Annabelle all the little things she hadn't guessed. They had worried a little about Howard, the chauffeur, and what might happen if, before Carlin decided the time was ripe, Howard should see through Bailey's disguise. Annabelle had laughed.

She had asked: "Bailey, you aren't going to make love to Howard, are you?"

He had laughed too, but the knowledge that Carlin had lied about the reasons for his going away had been the goad that sent Bailey searching frantically, desperately for proof of what Carlin meant to do with Bailey. This morning he had found the black box and the note that had told him how close he had come to being left on the floor of Carlin's study, a suicide.

BAILEY came out of the bathroom and closed the door behind him and leaned against it. He ran a hand over his freshly shaved face. Annabelle parodied a wolf whistle.

"You are almost handsome," she said.

Bailey took her in his arms and kissed her. If she seemed a little tense and restrained, he put it down to being nervous. After all, you didn't kill a man every day. Or every year.

"Was it—" Annabelle looked up at him. She tried it another way. "—did you—?"

"It wasn't messy and it is all over, if that is what you are trying to say," Bailey told her sharply. "Get hold of

yourself, baby. This is where it begins to get rough."

"But you said it would be easy from here on in. With Albert out of the way, what have we to worry about?" She let her lip dip down into a pout. She wasn't as pretty that way.

"There is always something to worry about," he explained. "Until we put this town behind us, you will learn to get nervous every time a cop just walks close to you or when you park within a block of a fire-plug. You got the tickets all right?"

Annabelle nodded. "One straight through to Los Angeles for me. And your ticket to St. Louis. When will you be able to meet me in Los Angeles?"

"When I put those bonds in circulation in St. Louis. A pal of mine can feed them into places without tying me into it. There wasn't much in cash and it won't last forever."

Annabelle kissed him again lightly. He let her run her hand over his smooth face.

He said: "Like it better this way?"

"Better?" Annabelle got a dreamy look in her eyes. "I told you we could go a long way, Bailey." She patted his arm and added: "Together."

"We had better get started." Bailey reached for his coat on a chair, put it on and put the black box under his coat and presed it against his ribs. "Find another purse, about so big." He made dimensions with his hands."

He poured a stiff drink and disposed of it as Annabelle went into the bedroom. She came back with a light traveling case and a large handbag. Bailey laughed at the size of the handbag.

He said: "It wasn't a watermelon I wanted you to carry."

He took the black box from under his coat and rubbed his ribs. The black box went into the big handbag.

"Now get this part straight, baby. We walk out of here as if we were going to spend a weekend in the country. There is a cab stand at the corner. If we see a cop, your first impulse will be to run. Forget it. But, if anything does go wrong—"

"What CAN go wrong?"

"Look, Annabelle," Bailey's voice was husky. "I spent a year learning to impersonate a man. All of that was rehearsal. Tonight, I killed him. I've explained about the suicide note. I'm not just Albert Carlin with his beard shaved off. Carlin meant that note to be found beside the body. *My body.* Now, it will be found beside him. When the Central Finance Company learns an executive has committed suicide, they will hide as much of his shortages as they can and that will be the end of the Carlin story."

The girl's look of worry and impatience began to fade.

Bailey said: "I'm not Carlin. I'm Red Bailey and I owe the Federal boys a year at Leavenworth. They can't tie me to you even though they can connect you to Albert Carlin."

"Then we have a nice long head start." Annabelle's eyes half closed. "And they won't find Carlin until next week?"

"When he doesn't show up at the office Monday, they will start looking, of course. Ready?"

"I'm ready," she answered.

Bailey handed her the bag. "You carry the bag with the black box. If we have to separate before we get to the station, get rid of that damn box as soon as possible. If they pick you up and question you, you can always say it was something Albert Carlin gave you. Everything straight in your mind?"

She nodded and opened the door. She peered down the hall, turned back to Bailey. He watched her narrowly. Her eyes widened, shock boiling over and pinching her face.

"Your face, Bailey. *Your face.*"

Bailey stabbed a tanned hand toward his face. "What about my face?"

"The skin of your face. The part that your beard hid. The untanned part. It's pale and the rest is tanned." Annabelle blinked her eyes rapidly. "Let me think."

Bailey watched her mind work. Some of the struggle showed through on her face. Damn Carlin and his cleverness. And his sun lamp. Annabelle's fingers dug into his arm.

"Wait," she commanded. "Don't stick your nose out into that hallway until I get back." She was gone, running down the hall toward the elevator.

BAILEY'S nervousness grew as he waited and wished vaguely that he had the gun he had thrown into the little lake. And he remembered, after a while, that Annabelle had carried the black box in the handbag with her. A gleam of sardonic amusement warmed his icy eyes for a moment as he felt the money in his coat pocket. The money that he had said was "not much cash" but which was actually forty thousand dollars. It wasn't in the black box. Then he looked at the clock and cursed softly, nervously. The door opened and Annabelle was breathing rapidly, tearing at the wrapper of a small package she carried.

She pulled him into the bedroom, turned on the light by the dressing table and forced him down onto the small bench. She screwed the lid from a small jar and her long fingers made dabbing motions at his face. She spread the thick stiff cream rapidly as his eyes searched hers in the mirror.

"Be glad I thought of this, Bailey. It's a preparation to hide blemishes. I'm really going to make you up tonight." She worked rapidly.

When she had finished, Bailey surveyed the finished job. His face had an almost theatrically healthy tone.

He said: "I would have missed that one, baby. Thanks again."

Annabelle burlesqued a heavy sigh. "I'll remember this night as long as I live."

"You and me too, baby."

Annabelle turned off the light and they closed the apartment door and rode the elevator down to the lobby . . .

Bailey paid off the cab at the airport terminal and followed Annabelle toward the station entrance. He kept his voice low: "Get your bag and ticket checked and cleared and meet me in the dining room. You can slip me the box in there if I give you the word. If anybody so much as gives us a funny look, hang onto the box and when your plane is called, get the hell out of here as fast as you can. Forget about me. I'll meet you in Los Angeles like we planned."

In the dining room, Annabelle ate listlessly, not talking to the big, sun-tanned man who sat next to her. Once she made a motion toward the purse and raised her eyebrows questioningly. Bailey shook his head. The fat man leaning against the cigar counter had not taken his eyes from Annebelle for ten minutes.

The thinner plainclothesman stood by the Western Union counter. There was no reason in Bailey's mind to think they were watching him but Bailey knew he would feel secure only when Annabelle was on that west-bound flight. Monday morning was a long way off. The loudspeaker droned its announcement.

Bailey spoke, hardly moving his lips. "Hang onto that box, baby. So long, see you in Los Angeles."

He watched her board the Los Angeles plane. The man in the coffee-colored suit who stood by the gate gave Annabelle an admiring once over and looked away. When the plane had cleared the field and its lights were a blob in the night sky, Bailey heard the St. Louis flight being called. He walked toward the gate in the fence that separated the station from the field. He put out his cigarette by the sign that read: "No Smoking." He agreed with the sign. Safety first. Be careful.

Twenty feet from the gate, he made his feet move more slowly. He had the sensation of walking on the tip of his toes. The man in the coffee-colored suit put out a hand and touched Bailey's arm.

He said: "Hello, Bailey."

Bailey swung around. The two men standing by the building walked toward him.

"Don't try anything, Bailey." The man in the coffee-colored suit took Bailey's arm as if he were an old friend. Overhead, on the spectator's ramp, another man waved his hand and trotted down the stairway. St. Louis bound passengers pushed around the three men in the gate, laughing and chattering and free.

"O.K.," Bailey said bitterly. "I won't give you any trouble."

He thought of Annabelle and the little black box and the forty thousand in his inside coat pocket. He wondered how Annabelle was going to feel when she hit Los Angeles and opened the box. For she would open the box without question. She would be disappointed that it held only nine thousand dollars' worth of bonds. She would be disappointed when that shrunk to five thousand when she managed to get rid of them. But it would be a little something for Annabelle.

Bailey knew he would remember Annabelle and when he got out of Leavenworth this time, he thought he might look up Annabelle. He felt the tug at his arm. The Federal cops must be awfully hard up these days, he mused, if they had to send out four men to pick up one escaped prisoner. The tug came again.

"All right," Bailey said. "I'm ready if you are."

IT WAS three hours before the detective, who said his name was Farlay, came back downstairs to Bailey's cell. He took off his hat and rubbed his bald head and offered Bailey a cigarette. Bailey shook his head. His tongue was raw now from three hours' incessant smoking.

Farlay said: "Anything you want to get off your chest?"

"Talking never got me anywhere," Bailey answered mechanically. He was making mental pictures of Annabelle and the L. A. flight and how, soon now, she would have passed Albuquerque and then after a while, she would be in Los Angeles.

"When do I start for Leavenworth?"

"Leavenworth?" Farlay raised his thin eyebrows. "I didn't pick you up for Leavenworth. You're all mine. Sure, we owe them a little something for sending us a circular on you. That made it easier to spot you. But you're mine. Tell me about the woman."

"What woman?"

Farlay smiled with weary patience. "The woman who tipped us you were going to be at the airport tonight, headed for St. Louis. She said you had the answers on the murder of Albert Carlin."

"Carlin? What do I know about Albert Carlin?"

Farlay sighed. "You're just making it harder for me, Bailey. We went to Carlin's residence, found it all locked up except a window in the library. Now here's the way we figure it: you set out to rob the house, you came in through a window, found Carlin sitting by the fireplace. You killed him and faked a suicide note. You robbed his safe, argued with the woman over the split and she turned you in."

"What woman?"

"All we have at the moment," Farlay explained, "is the woman's tip that you were there and you killed Carlin. I don't mind telling you that without the woman's story to go on, we haven't much. Two or three little things, maybe but not much. Now, if we can locate the woman, she can fill in the things that aren't clear."

Bailey remained silent. Yes, he would certainly look up Annabelle some day. He hadn't given her nearly enough. Her telephone call must have been made from the drug store when she had gone out to buy the cream that now hid the paleness of his skin.

Too bad for Farlay that Annabelle was so far away. So far away now that Farlay would wear the rest of his hair off trying to find the answer and in the end he would ship Bailey off to Leavenworth. Annabelle hadn't got as much out of it as she expected but she wasn't going to come forward now and put the finger on him again. Bailey could see why Farlay had lost his hair.

A young cop rattled the door. Farlay got up and talked to him in an undertone for several minutes. He came back and stared down at Bailey.

"You can see how wrong first impressions can be," Farlay said. "I was all wrong. I just got the final report on Carlin. The suicide note was in his handwriting and had probably been written for days or maybe for a week. He was

short in his accounts and he took the easy way out. The gun he used had the prints of his right hand all over it. By the way, Bailey, where have you been holed up for the last year?"

Bailey's hand automatically went to his face and his hand rubbed a faint streak of the dark cream onto his fingers. He looked at the stain and put his hands in his pockets.

Farlay said: "It doesn't matter. We'll find out sooner or later. Here—" Farlay held out an automatic to Bailey. He thought at first that it was Carlin's automatic but then they would want it as Exhibit A. Bailey tensed like a fox scenting a tricky lure. Farlay dropped the gun in Bailey's lap.

"It won't hurt you. It isn't loaded." Bailey let the gun lay. Farlay said slowly: "It has been puzzling me. Maybe you can help me. Go through the motions as though you were jacking a shell into the chamber."

SWEAT beaded Bailey's face. His hand gripped the gun hard and his left hand came up, the thumb and forefinger went over and found the flat slide. He hesitated, then slowly pulled back the slide and released it.

"Unh-hunh," Farlay said softly. "That's the way I would do it. Now, I want you to do the whole operation with your right hand."

"Do what?"

"Go through the motions of loading the gun. Slip the magazine into the butt. Slip off the safety. Pull the slide back—"

Bailey's breath deepened and he looked down at the ingenious bit of mechanical engineering that made the automatic pistol possible. The reason for Farlay's questions came to his mind at the same time Farlay's words came to his ears.

"You don't care to try it?" Farlay picked up the gun. "I'd like to leave the gun with you and let you figure out how to pull that slide back with the right hand while the right hand held the gun. The fingerprints on Carlin's gun shows he had to do it that way. You can't do it. I can't do it. We don't figure Carlin could have done it either. As I say, I'd like to leave the gun, but it's against regulations."

Bailey was silent. Without Annabelle, Farlay didn't have a case. All Bailey had to do was keep his mouth shut and hope for a break.

Farlay said: "That's what makes a cop's life so hard, Bailey. We see something easy, then it gets fouled up and we have to start all over again. We'll find out where you holed up for a year. How you came to be mixed up with a dame who was mixed up with Carlin. I could let it pass as suicide and save myself a lot of work but I'd always wonder how Carlin managed to jack a shell into the chamber without using his left hand at all. And I'd always wonder who the woman was who passed up the chance to help you spend that forty thousand bucks we're holding for you until we're through with you."

"What woman?" repeated Bailey wearily.

"The woman who had dinner with you and left on the Los Angeles plane. I wondered so hard I put it on the teletype for the chief at Albuquerque. I asked him to take her off the plane and hold her for me." He pulled his lips down. "Maybe it doesn't mean a thing. Maybe it means a lot."

Farlay stood away from Bailey and moved the slide back and forth several times on the automatic. He put the gun in his pocket, took out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Bailey. Bailey numbly took it and let Farlay light it for him. It had a bitter taste. Or perhaps the bitter taste was already in his mouth. It was hard to tell.

The young cop came down the stairs again and his feet scuffed along the cement floor. He banged on the steel cell door. Farlay turned his tired eyes to the cop.

The young cop said: "They want you upstairs, Farlay."

Farlay buttoned his coat and followed the young cop. Bailey's cigarette burned unnoticed between his fingers. He heard the young cop say, "It's a long-distance call—from Albuquerque."

When he came to, he was in a basement somewhere—tied to a chair.

By DONN MULLALLY

DEATH TAKES A DIVE

Mike O'Reilly—a Champ in the ring, Champion sucker outside —was pleased and proud when his prize deadbeat wanted to pay up his debts. Too bad the payoff was in blood money— and the blood was Mike's!

CHARLIE WINGATE had quit kidding himself a long time ago. He was a penny-ante racketeer and he knew it. Private investigator—nuts, the same thing. Sometimes he wondered if there was a petty larceny angle he'd overlooked.

There couldn't be many. It took a lot of sharp dodging to keep even a heap like this Chevvy away from the loan company. He was stalling off a collection agency for the lousy gray pin-stripe he was wearing. Only a smart operator could roll behind the ball like he had.

He snapped off the ignition and coasted to a stop in front of a Spanish-type bungalow. He ran his eye over it, figuring percentages. Throw in all the fancy rose bushes, cactus, palm trees, it still didn't come to more than ten grand.

Wingate shoved his sweat-stained Panama off the ridge of his forehead.

How about this guy? The welterweight champ of the world, worth important money, living in this from-hunger setup. Wingate had nothing against the simple life—for simple people. But when a guy pulled down fifty grand a fight, it ought to show.

Wingate got out of his car and scuffed across the brittle, dust-laden lawn. Inside his gray suit he was roasting; outside, he smelled like a goat. His mouth was dry and tasted of stale cigarettes. He hated the whole damn thing.

He found the champ puttering around some rose bushes at the side of his house. He was on his knees in the sandy, dry dirt, snipping at the bushes with pruning shears.

His blue jeans were faded and patched in the seat. His sweatshirt was filthy, soaked front and back with perspiration. He needed a shave, and there were flakes of fertilizer dangling in his black, curly hair. If the champ hadn't looked so happy, Wingate would have felt better about his own seedy appearance.

A guy can afford to look like a bum on O'Reilly's bankroll, Wingate thought as he forced a big hello.

Mike O'Reilly looked up and made with the boyish grin. "Hello, Charlie—what's new?"

Wingate shuffled his feet and spat. "Same old crap. I can't seem to score."

The champ sighed and got off his knees. He stretched, and slipped his pruning shears in his back pocket. He knew the rest of Wingate routine by heart.

He wasn't disappointed.

The shamus tugged at his crummy collar and gave himself hell.

O'Reilly listened, watched Wingate's cigarette bounce over the bitter words he was casting at himself. He made fifty bucks out of his wallet and handed it to the detective.

"Here kid, maybe this'll start the ball for you."

Wingate had to be coaxed, but not too hard. He finally pocketed the dough, saying: "I shouldn't do this, Champ. I'm already into you enough. If I wasn't a heel, I wouldn't. . . ."

MIKE tried to escape under the covers, but his wife's voice still found him. He groaned and came up for air. For a minute he lay there watching her. You know, he decided, she's a pretty thing, even when she's miffed at me.

"I wouldn't mind so much, O'Reilly," the old lady was sitting up in bed like she had no intention of going to sleep until she settled it—her way, "if Charlie Wingate was the only deadbeat we were supporting. But we're keeping half the tramps in Hollywood!"

"Look, honey," he said, "I know you're right. But I can't turn a guy down when he's hungry."

Winifred bounced impatiently. "No one wants you to. Give them a few dollars, even invite them to stay for dinner, but don't empty your wallet to every hard-luck story you hear!"

O'Reilly tried to capture his wife's hand. She kept it away from him. "A few bucks or a handout won't help much when a guy's in a spot," he observed sleepily.

She tilted her little nose and shook her curls at him. "I hope you're never the one who's in the spot. You'd never get a nickel out of a Charlie Wingate!"

He put his arms around her and pulled her down off the pillow. She struggled a little. "That isn't going to happen to us, and you know it. You've got enough socked away in annuities now to keep the O'Reillys for ten lifetimes. The few hundred bucks I loan out aren't going to

hurt us. Besides honey, they might pay me back."

Winifred looked up at him. Her eyes were troubled. "Oh Mike, you're such a dope—such a sweet dope!"

He smiled and kissed her. "That's my girl. . ."

Then they got some sleep.

Mike O'Reilly didn't give it another thought. He figured he could afford to loan money to guys like Wingate, but not worry about it.

It must have been a week later that Winifred sent little Mike out from the house with a Mr. Harold Brown. Mike crawled down out of the walnut tree he was doctoring and shook hands with Mr. Brown.

Little Mike let his Dad tousle his black mop, then scurried off about the mysterious business of a small boy.

Mike's visitor was a dapper, round character in a neat gray tropical suit and a Panama hat. His fat, pleasant face blushed at the hand-painted nude on his necktie. His grip was moist, but professionally hearty.

He was an attorney, he explained. "Representing Charles Wingate."

"Yeah?" Mike responded cautiously.

"I think I have some good news for you," Mr. Brown chirped, removing his hat and swabbing perspiration off his bald head.

"Yeah?" Mike sounded a little less suspicious.

If it was good news, Winifred should hear it. "Let's go in the house," he suggested. "It's cooler."

Mike took him in the back way, through the kitchen, to his den. Winifred appeared when he hollered for her.

"Mr. Brown is an attorney," Mike explained, settling into the cool leather of his favorite chair. "He has something to tell us about Charlie Wingate."

His wife frowned, perching herself on the edge of a carved chest. Mike smiled reassuringly. Mr. Brown also mirrored good will from the depths of the red davenport opposite Mike.

"As I understand it, Mr. O'Reilly," he began, "my client owed you a considerable sum of money."

"He does," Winifred corrected.

"Quite right." Mr. Brown smiled. "To be exact, the sum is six hundred and eighty-five dollars—with interest."

"Forget the interest," Mike remarked, waving his hand. "I'm not in that business."

"It's very decent of you to say that, Mr. O'Reilly, but you understand I must follow Mr. Wingate's wishes. He feels he owes you six hundred and eighty-five dollars." Brown wiped his face with a wilted handkerchief.

Winifred looked pointedly at her husband, slouched in his chair. "What does Mr. Wingate propose to do about it?"

Mr. Brown sighed and beamed happily. "He wants to make what I hope will be a substantial payment. You see, Mr. Wingate has accepted a commission which will take him out of the country for the better part of a year—to South America. What advance he was able to get was necessarily dissipated against certain other obligations, but he did not forget his debt to you."

Mike scratched his head. "He didn't need to worry about me. I'm glad he's getting a break. He was due."

Winifred frowned and gagged him with a look. "It's very considerate of Mr. Wingate, I'm sure."

Brown continued: "He had to leave rather more suddenly than he expected, so he assigned the equity in his car and his office furniture to Mr. O'Reilly. I have the papers here."

Mike shifted uneasily. "He shouldn't 've done it. He'll need his stuff when he gets back."

"Darling," Winifred's voice was edged with a dangerous lift, "I think we should permit Mr. Wingate to repay us, if he wishes."

"Yes indeed." Mr. Brown shook his fat cheeks at Mike earnestly.

Mike sighed. "I suppose we should. But I hate to clean the fella out. I feel like 'The Friendly Credit Loan Company.' "

"Now you shouldn't, Mr. O'Reilly!" Mr. Brown exclaimed. "Look at it this way. If he didn't dispose of these things, they would be an expense to maintain

while he is gone. He's actually saving himself money and paying you something on account at the same time!"

Mr. Brown scratched around in his briefcase and came up with the property assignments and the keys to Wingate's office and car. He handed them to Mike.

"Here you are." He beamed again. "I'm sure my client will be pleased you find his offer acceptable. We'll make an accounting of what is realized from the sale of his effects and he can make further arrangements for the balance."

Mike jingled the keys and eyed the inventory of Wingate's office furniture. "O. K. If it's what he wants."

Mr. Brown snapped his briefcase shut and fussed with his coat and hat. "Excellent. Now if I may suggest, we can check the inventory any time at your convenience."

Winifred smiled. "I think Mike can make it tomorrow morning."

The attorney huffed to his feet. His suit was wrinkled, and there were damp spots in the creases. "Good," he said. "I'll meet you at the office at nine-thirty."

"He'll be there," Winifred promised.

Mike rose and shook hands with Mr. Brown. He put his arm around Winifred's waist and they took their guest to the door.

Winifred watched Mr. Brown's ample back as he waddled out to his car. She turned to her husband: "I never thought I'd see the day."

Mike smiled. "That's what I keep trying to tell you, honey. Some of these guys are all right. They have a run of tough luck, but they mean O. K."

He patted her affectionately, then went back to his ailing walnut tree.

WINIFRED got him out of the house the next morning in time to make his appointment with Mr. Brown.

He met the attorney in front of the building in which Wingate had his office. It was a two-story, stucco deal about a block and a half off Hollywood Boulevard. Downstairs they sold plumbing fixtures.

If anything, Brown's grin was bigger, his hand damper than Mike remembered. O'Reilly wasn't critical of people. But sometimes a too-friendly character like this gave him the creeps.

As they walked up the stairs to Wingate's office, Mike wondered why some fat men smell like a tub of dirty diapers all the time.

They clattered down the hall, past doors which advertised various obscure enterprises, to one bearing Wingate's name and below it: *Private Investigator.*

Mike fitted the key and opened the door.

There was an outer office; small, windowless, with a couple of hard, straight-backed chairs, an ancient wicker magazine rack, and a dusty, stale odor. At the moment, light filtered through a frosted glass in a door marked: *Private.*

Mr. Brown flicked a light switch and it was worse.

They stepped into Wingate's private office.

His desk, which held down a worn, frazzled rug, was a decrepit, oak veneer affair with edges scalloped by cigarette burns. The top was cracked, warped, and marked with glass stains.

A dusty, vintage typewriter and a rickety typing table were shoved against one wall.

Mike added the sprung, spotted davenport, the two sagging metal file cabinets, a worn leather chair, and wondered if there was a hundred bucks in the whole joint.

He opened one of the file drawers and an empty whiskey bottle rattled at him. He sat down behind Wingate's desk and wished he hadn't let Winifred talk him into coming.

When Mr. Brown had finished checking his inventory, he beamed on O'Reilly. "Yes, it's all here."

Mike nodded. "Good. Now tell me what I'm supposed to do with it."

The attorney smiled and cast his eye over the inventory again. "Office furniture being as tight as it is, I think I know where I can get you two hundred dollars—just as it stands."

Mike looked up, amazed. "Sold," he said.

"Now about the equity in Mr. Wingate's car. I checked on it," Mr. Brown continued, busily. "I believe we—"

The door opened and the attorney was hung up in the middle of what he believed.

It started with red hair and a tricky black hat. The hair framed a face and throat which provided a delicately tinted coppery background for two enormous eyes; a nose, straight and thin with a suggestion of flaring at the nostrils; and a red-lipped, provocative mouth.

She had the body to go with it. Mike couldn't see her legs for the edge of the desk, but from the expression on Brownie's face, he figured they must be all right, too.

The rest of her outfit, the dark, rust-colored summer suit, the white ruffled shirt, her bag and gloves screamed class.

She arched her eyebrows as Brown gulped back his words. "Am I interrupting something?" she asked.

The attorney found enough voice to assure here she wasn't. He helped her into a chair.

She looked from Brown to O'Reilly. "Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Wingate?" she asked.

Mike let Mr. Brown carry the ball.

"I'm afraid neither of us is," he explained, as she looked puzzled in a perfectly charming manner. "Mr. Wingate is out of town. We—"

"You're taking over for him while he's gone?" Her tone was urgent. She stripped off a glove and fumbled nervously in her bag for a cigarette.

Mike shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. We're—we're friends of his—just using his office for a business talk."

"Oh no—this can't be!" Her hand trembled as she lighted her cigarette. "Mr. Wingate said he'd meet me here today. It's terribly important."

MR. BROWN dripped solicitude. "I'm sure he meant to, but he was called away very suddenly. It happens I am his attorney. Perhaps I can help."

O'Reilly's collar felt tight.

"I don't know," she was saying. "It was awfully confidential. We'd talked over the phone. He was supposed to have some information for me."

Mr. Brown's red cheeks swelled up and burst into dimples. "Now I understand," he said. "You're Mrs. Dexter!"

Gorgeous admitted it.

"I have something for you." Brownie sucked in a yard of gut and squeezed past her to a broken-down davenport where he'd thrown his briefcase. "Right here!"

He found an envelope and handed it to her.

Mrs. Dexter glanced up apologetically as she ripped it open and read the sheet of typing it contained. Her eyes bubbled tears.

O'Reilly thought: "Oh, nuts!"

She pushed the note across the desk to him. He was stuck. He had to read it. It was a rough piece of work in every department, strictly poison typewriter.

> Mrs. Dexter:
>
> Your husband is involved with a blonde named Aileene Morgan. She lives in room 204 at the Parker Hotel in L.A. On the nights of the 16th, 18th and 21st of this month he entertained this girl and later registered at the Parker.
>
> Wingate.

Mike returned the note. "Was he gone those nights?" he asked.

She nodded, dabbing her eyes with a lace hankie.

Mike looked at Brown. "You ought to know about these things. It seems her husband is playing around. Your client caught him and arranged this clambake."

Brown's fat cheeks wobbled frantically. "I didn't have anything to do with it. Wingate just gave me the note and told me to give it to Mrs. Dexter first chance I got."

O'Reilly felt sick. This sewer was getting him. He turned to Mrs. Dexter. "It's a bum shake, lady. Why don't you forget it?"

She'd stopped crying. Her eyes had become hard. "I can't. This isn't the first time he's humiliated me, but it's

going to be the last. If I can just catch him with this girl. . ."

Mike scratched his head and rubbed the ridge of scar tissue over his eyes. He felt sorry for the dame. One thing he couldn't understand: why a guy would ever chisel on a dish like this. But it happened every day.

"It's tough," he commented. "I wish I could help."

Mrs. Dexter brightened. "Oh would you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"O'Reilly," he offered. "Mike O'Reilly—and if these cauliflower ears don't mean anything to you either, I'll explain. I'm a boxer. I wouldn't do you any good."

Her eyes fogged over. "I know." She sounded all choked up. "I know I have no right to expect. . ."

Mike shifted uneasily in his chair, his neck felt hot. "That's not the idea, lady," he explained. "It's just not my racket."

She turned her charm on Brown. "Please talk to him, Mr. Brown," she urged. "I'm sure you can make him understand how much it would mean to me to have him with me when I catch Mr. Dexter with this girl."

The attorney panted happily in the glow of her attention. "Yes, indeed, Mr. O'Reilly," he exclaimed. "You would be an invaluable witness!"

Mike shook his head. "No, I—"

"Please, Mr. O'Reilly," she over-rode his objection urgently, "don't say no. All you'll have to do after we raid my husband's room is swear out a deposition of what you saw. I'll be eternally grateful to you. . . And," she pressed, "I'll pay you a hundred and fifty dollars for your trouble."

Mike thought about it. He didn't go for the idea, and the money was no inducement, actually. But Brown had said he could get two hundred for the office furniture; probably there was another hundred and a half or two hundred in Wingate's jalopy. Mrs. Dexter's offering would just about clean up the Wingate loan. He didn't figure it would hurt if once in awhile he wasn't a big chump about money. Besides, this Mrs. Dexter really needed someone to level with her.

"O. K," he said, "it's a deal."

Mrs. Dexter gave him her soft, little hand on it. He could feel the jolt clear to his shoulder. . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Corpse Walked Home

AT seven-thirty Mike O'Reilly was driving out Sunset Boulevard toward the Villa Barcelona. His square-cut face was set in a stubborn frown; his eyes glazed with concentration beyond the mere jockeying of traffic around him. He was a little sore.

Sometimes he didn't understand Winifred. She'd ride him about something, and when he'd try to figure it out her way, he'd really catch hell. All he was trying to do was get all the dough back he could out of the Wingate deal. He thought she'd go for that.

But no, she'd raised the merry devil with him when he told her about Mrs. Dexter. She said it was none of his business. It wasn't even decent.

My God, you'd think he was going to make a career of chasing Mr. Dexter and his blonde.

Winifred even reminded him he was fighting in a couple of months. What did that have to do with the way he spent one night? Mike ground his teeth.

He stopped scowling when he walked into the lobby of the Villa Barcelona. It was a Hollywood version of old Spain, and probably pretty good.

He sent word to Mrs. Dexter and she came right down.

She was wearing a black tailored suit and carried a mink jacket over her arm. Her high heels clicked waxily as she cruised across the lobby, enthusing: "I'm so glad you could make it."

Mike was permitted to carry the mink jacket out to his car.

Mrs. Dexter thought their best bet for picking up the trail of her wayward spouse would be to watch his girl friend's hotel. It sounded likely to Mike, so they drove downtown and found a parking lot directly across from the Parker, where

they could cover the entrance without leaving the car.

The Parker Hotel was a red brick flea-bag, advertised fireproof, which if true would be too bad. It looked like it could use a good, clean fire.

Mike lost interest in counting windows and wound up having a nice, clubby chat with Mrs. Dexter. He told her about boxing, his family, his one-and-a-half acre ranch. He was giving her the life history of his two orange trees, when Mrs. Dexter clamped on his arm.

A couple had just come out of the hotel and were getting into a cab. There was enough light under the glass marquee for Mike to see the lady was a blonde and stacked. He couldn't tell much about the man except he was wearing a dark suit, a sailor-type straw hat, and was built blocky.

"There they are!" Mrs. Dexter whispered.

Mike punched the starter button and rolled out in the wake of Dexter's cab. The chase was on. It took them the better part of the night to wear out Dexter and his floozie. Mike followed them into the dives, sat around guzzling cokes, while Mrs. D. stayed with the car and did the driving between joints.

Mike's patience was wearing thin when Dexter finally called it an evening and a cab dropped him and his honey at the hotel.

Mrs. Dexter ducked into a parking lot next to the Parker, while Mike tailed her old man into the lobby.

He was just registering, when Mike entered. His blonde was tapping her toe over by the elevator. Mike drifted to the magazine rack which adjoined the desk. He picked out a photomag, and when the night clerk was through with Dexter, paid for it. He was dragging his ear, but nothing came of it.

Mike noticed Dexter and his blonde rode the elevator direct to the sixth floor. He remembered Wingate's note had said Miss Morgan lived on the second floor. But not tonight. . .

Mike found a greasy overstuffed chair and sat down to make a pretense of reading his magazine. The desk clerk paid him no mind. Except for a sailor copping a flop on a low-slung davenport across the lobby, Mike had the joint to himself.

It took the bellhop about five minutes to get Dexter and tomato tucked in their room. When he came down, he hooked the elevator door back and strolled across the lobby. Mike called him over with a nod. He had a five-spot folded in his palm.

"Where," he asked quietly, "can I talk to you?"

The hop looked at the five and moistened his lips. He had a face like a Pekinese, an old, old Pekinese. "I gotta go to a liquor store down the street, Jack's."

"Good. Get me a couple of cigars before you go, will you?" Mike handed him the five.

The hop was glad to oblige. Mike told him to keep the change.

He hung around for a few minutes after the bellhop had gone through the revolving doors. Then he folded his magazine and wandered in the same direction.

He found the hop waiting for him outside Jack's Liquor Store. He was holding a paper sack. The neon glow didn't flatter the lad's pushed-in face a single bit.

"Say," he said as Mike walked up, "tell me. Ain't you Mike O'Reilly?"

Mike frowned and nodded. "Yeah."

"I thought so. Well, what's the pitch, Champ? What can I do for you?"

"A friend of mine is interested in the Mr. Dexter you just took up to the sixth floor. They want to know about him and the blonde."

"Is his name Dexter?" the hop asked, innocently.

Mike showed him another five.

He rubbed his button nose with the back of his free hand. "Yeah, I guess it is. . . What do you want to know?"

"We understand he is seeing a lot of this blonde."

The hop shifted his package from one arm to the other. He grinned. "Champ, I'd like to help you, but it's stickin' my neck out a helluva long ways."

"All right. What room did you take them to?"

"Room 622."

Mike handed him the five. "You've got ten. Want to try for twenty?"

"I might."

"How about a passkey?"

"I think you skipped one, Champ," the hop smiled wisely. "That sounds like the sixty-four dollar question to me."

"O. K., you called it. Sixty-four." Mike spread the money in the hop's outstretched palm and added the two cigars. "How about it?"

The hop nodded and walked down the street to a darkened doorway. He took a key chain out of his pants pocket. "Here you are, Champ. Now for God's sake play ball! I can lose my can doing this."

"I'll play."

"Awright. . . Now here's the way we'll work it," the hop explained rapidly. "Give me half an hour to get back to the hotel and report I lost my key. I'll catch hell, but it's O.K. You bring your party and come around back the building. There's a service door off the alley. I'll open up. Then you're on your own. I don't know nuthin' about you."

"Don't worry kid. I'll keep you out of it," Mike assured him. "And thanks."

"Forget it, Champ," the hop leered. "Good huntin'."

He darted out of the doorway, hurrying back to the hotel. Mike waited until he was out of sight, then went back to his car.

Mrs. Dexter was getting her money's worth. And Mike had to admit he was having fun up to now. Maybe there was something in this private-eyed racket after all!

HIS "client's" smart, well-tailored poise was coming apart at the seams. When he opened his car door, she flew at him with excitement. The strangest thing had just happened—a man had stepped out of the shadows of the building and spoken to her.

"He knew who I was!" Mrs. Dexter declared, breathlessly. "He told me he knew about Mr. Dexter and this Miss Morgan, who lives in the hotel. He wanted to help us get together. He gave me the key to her room!"

Mike took the key from her and held it under the dashlight. The tag identified it as the key to room 204 of the Parker Hotel.

"I don't get it," Mike remarked. "How could anybody spot you sitting here?"

He returned the key to her. "You never saw the guy before?"

"No, never," she asserted. "The whole thing is positively weird!"

Mike nodded. "What happened to him?"

"He went back toward the alley—not two minutes before you came up."

Mike scratched his head. "Well," he said, forcing a smile, "I guess if we can shadow your old man, there's no law that says somebody else can't shadow us. It's damn strange."

He told her about the deal he'd made with the bellhop for them to raid her husband's room. He had just time to cover the details and get her around to the service entrance of the hotel, inside the hop's half hour.

It was dark and it smelled like all alleys, everywhere—mildew, garbage, and cats. Mike felt his way along the wall until he came to an unlocked door.

"O. K., Champ." The hop got them inside and started. "Here's your stairway. It goes up the back of the building. The room you want is 622—follow the hall around to your right, when you get to the sixth floor."

The stairway trunk was lighted at each floor by a red fire light. They counted six of them, then opened the door and started down the hallway.

About every thirty feet there was a wall lamp behind a dirty shield. There was just enough light so the cockroaches could see you coming and duck.

They found room 622. Mike listened at the door. No sound.

He beat on the door. That got a growl from inside.

"Open up, Dexter!" Mike yelled. "I know you've got a dame in there."

From inside a heavy voice rumbled: "Nuts."

Mike used his key, threw open the door and snapped on the overhead light just in time to see the most interesting part of a female scoot out another door. For the record, it was wearing a pink nightie.

"Who was that?" he shouted.

"Mata Hari," Dexter sneered. "And who the hell are you?"

"The house detective."

Dexter was sitting up in bed, just about as happy as a rattlesnake in a cloudburst. He reached for the phone on the night table. "We'll see about that!"

Mike didn't hang around to see how he made out. He suddenly realized Mrs. Dexter had taken after her husband's sweetie. He figured he'd done all the damage he could in Dexter's room, so he tagged along after the women as fast as he possibly could.

He made room 204 in time to hear the shot. He knew what it was, muffled but definite. Pounding on the door didn't get him anything—turning the knob got him too much. It opened. . .

From the door, he could see into the bathroom. On the floor, bleeding on the bathmat, was a girl. She was wearing a skimpy, pink nightdress.

Mrs. Peter B. Dexter was lying right beside her, out cold. She had a gun in one hand and in the other a towel with a hole burnt in it that she'd used to muffle the shot.

Mike didn't want any part of it.

He grabbed the wall phone in front of him and jiggled the hook like a madman. He waited, cussing the dope on the board. Why didn't he answer?

Desperate, Mike hung up and ran downstairs to the lobby. The night clerk looked up as he stormed across to the desk.

"Why can't you answer this damn phone?" Mike demanded.

The clerk looked hurt. "Have you been trying to get me?"

"Hell no," Mike raved. "I want to keep it a secret. A woman's only been murdered in room 204!"

The clerk's jaw fell. "Murdered?"

"That's right. I've been trying to get you on the phone for the past three minutes. Come on."

The clerk called to the bellhop who was drifting over toward them: "Take the desk, Phil."

He and Mike ran up to the second floor and down the corridor to Miss Morgan's room. Mike had shut the door, but hadn't locked it. It was locked now.

He opened it with his passkey, expecting anything. But certainly not what he got.

THE ROOM was empty. But completely. There wasn't any blonde, or Mrs. Dexter on the bathroom floor. The bloody bathmat was gone. So was the scorched towel.

"There's something funny here," Mike asserted, looking around the empty room.

The clerk eyed him suspiciously. "There certainly is."

"Only a couple of minutes ago there was a dead woman lying there on the bathroom floor. She'd been shot. I heard it, that's how I happened to find her."

The clerk looked from the clean tile floor to the equally blank expression on Mike's face. "You sure you're all right?"

Mike grabbed him by the shirt front and banged him against the wall. "You're damn-well right. There was a dead woman here, understand!"

The clerk crawled off the wall when Mike let go of him. "Sure, sure—" he said, shakenly. "I understand. There was a dead woman in this room. She got tired and went home. How about you doing the same thing?"

Mike said: "O. K., have it your way, smart guy."

He turned and walked out of the room. He could feel the clerk's sneer flaming his ears.

There was just one thing to do. He'd drop this whole mess in the lap of the police. Maybe he and the wise night clerk wouldn't see anything wrong in room 204, but the cops could. There had to be something!

He wrenched open his car door and crawled in. He reached down to snap on the ignition, then changed his mind

about the cops. The chill of cold steel on the back of his neck persuaded him.

Mrs. Dexter's lovely image was reflected in the windshield. Her voice was as cold as the muzzle of her gun.

"What kept you, O'Reilly?"

Mike fumbled his end of the conversation uncomfortably. He wasn't exactly frightened, but he had a lot of respect for her gun. She'd used it once.

"Never mind," she said. "Just drive where I tell you."

Mike found it easier to talk to her reflection, shadowy though it was. "What did you do with the body?"

"Miss Morgan?" she asked, casually. "I brought her along. I thought the fresh air would do her good."

Mike groaned.

"Let's get started," Mrs. Dexter commanded. "Drive out Sunset to Brentwood. I'll tell you where to go after we get there. And don't—don't, Mr. O'Reilly—attempt to attract any attention on the way."

Mike got the point. She ground it into the back of his neck. He didn't see how he could help his situation by getting bumped off, so he drove.

Out past Hollywood, Beverly Hills, through streams of late traffic. It was the most circumspect bit of driving Mike had ever done. Mrs. Dexter never let him forget she was there, ready to send a hunk of lead smashing into his skull—back-seat driving deluxe.

Mrs. Dexter directed him to leave Sunset and drive back into Brentwood Hills. They stopped at the gates of a big estate. The gateman identified Mrs. Dexter and gave them the office to proceed.

Just what Mike could see of it in the dark, it was some wigwam—one of those twenty-five or thirty room Mediterranean jobs. There was about a quarter of a mile of driveway from the gate to the house, and a small parking lot holding a dozen or so snooty, chrome-studded rigs just beyond. Mike eased into a spot and stopped.

"High-class funeral parlor you picked for your friend," Mike commented dryly.

"It'll do," she remarked. "Now we'll get out at the same time. Then you can lock the car. But remember, no tricks!"

When Mike locked the back end, he saw Miss Morgan lying on the floor, partially covered by Mrs. Dexter's fur jacket. He turned and led the little procession to the house.

They were admitted at a side door. Mike thought he recognized the hood at the door; at least he was the standard, gun-carrying model.

He gave Mike a fast frisk and jerked his head for them to follow him. Mrs. Dexter was still covering him under her purse. Mike was no cutup. He followed.

They were taken up a marble stairway which spun halfway around the foyer. It was just like going to the balcony at the Fox-Beverly Hills Theatre, Mike thought. "I wonder what's playing."

The hood brought them to a small room furnished like a doctor's reception room, without the 1912 *Geographics*. Mike was waved into a chair.

Mrs. Dexter left their hood-guide to keep Mike company, entering the room beyond and closing the door. The thug sat across from Mike, fondling a .38 he'd pulled from a shoulder holster.

Mike just brooded in his chair. This thing got more fantastic by the minute. He hoped someone would start making with the answers, and soon.

It was almost ten minutes, seeming more like ten years, before Mrs. Dexter opened the door and motioned for Mike to join the party. The man with the gun followed him.

The room he entered was large and circular with a high, domed ceiling reflecting indirect lighting. The walls were done in olive-green paneling. It featured an oversized fireplace of red brick, bookcases set into the walls, and heavy monk's-cloth furniture. A kidney-shaped desk stood in the curve of the windows, and behind it a platinum-haired, red-faced gent Mike recognized at once.

Jake Shamrock! Big Jake, the gambler. So he ran this show!

"Hello, O'Reilly," he said, putting on a phony smile.

Mike nodded.

"I understand," Shamrock indicated

Mrs. Dexter as the source, "you're in something of a jam."

MIKE studied the bulging form of the gambler: his sharp, little eyes; his meaty hands, pink and soft. He glanced from Mrs. Dexter, lounging across the arm of a chair, to the hood, who had taken a position on one of the wall-seats.

"You might call it that," he admitted.

Big Jake beamed and waved his hand, scattering fire from a diamond ring on his pinkie. "Well now, I wouldn't worry about it. I think we can handle it for you."

Mike looked at him narrowly. "Don't do me any favors, Jake. This one's on your friend." He nodded toward Mrs. Dexter.

The gambler continued to smile. "Glad to help. Just give me the keys to your car, O'Reilly. I'll have one of the boys give Miss Morgan a decent burial—at sea."

Shamrock came around his desk, his pudgy, jeweled hand extended. Mike wanted to whip a left into his smiling, beefy puss. He shook his head.

"What do you take me for, Shamrock? This woman was murdered. I don't want any part of covering up."

The gunman slipped up behind him and jabbed his .38 in Mike's ribs. "Do like the boss says."

Mike handed over his keys.

Big Jake grinned paternally. "You're a hard guy to help, Champ."

Mike let it pass, watching Shamrock cross the room, covered by his gun-toting stooge. They left and he was alone with Mrs. Dexter.

She was reaching in her purse.

"Forget the rod," Mike said, throwing himself disgustedly into a chair across from her. "I know when I'm licked."

Gorgeous flashed him a smile and worried a cigarette out of her bag, offered him one. He took it absently, lighted it, let Mrs. Dexter light her own.

She pouted, crossed her legs, and flounced her curls. Mike wasn't noticing. She smoked for a minute, studying Mike's dark scowl, then: "When you act this way, I know I did the right thing."

Mike looked up, surprised. "What have I got to do with you killing that babe?"

Mrs. Dexter pouted again, wrinkled her pretty brow. "Nothing," she explained, "but you think I killed her."

O'Reilly swallowed, ran his stubby fingers through his coarse hair. "Look," he said, "I'm just a dumb leatherpusher, but I got eyes. I saw you and this kid—she was shot, and you'd fainted with the gun in your hand. Then you force me to drive you out here so you can turn her body over to Jake Shamrock for what he calls 'a decent burial.' What am I supposed to think?"

"Would you listen to my side of it?" she asked.

Mike snorted. "Why not? We've got time to kill."

"Very well," she said, "I don't expect you to believe me. I don't expect anyone to. That's why I had to keep away from the police.

"When Miss Morgan ran out of my husband's room, I followed her. We got to her room practically in a dead heat. I forced my way in, and that's the last I remember."

Mike tugged at one corner of his mouth with a grin. "You're sure everything didn't just go red, or white, or purple?"

He shagged the butt into the fireplace, watching Mrs. Dexter fight to keep a blush below her neckline.

"No!" she exclaimed. "I told you I didn't expect you to believe any of my story. But let me finish, please.

"The next thing I knew, I was coming to on the bathroom floor and I could hear you cussing at the phone. You'd run out of the room before I realized my situation.

"I managed to drag my body out the back way and get it into your car without being seen. Jake Shamrock was the only person I knew who could help me. I had to force you to bring me out here.

"I don't suppose it matters, but I'm sorry. I'm sorry I got you into this."

Mike left his chair and stalked around the room. He looked at the titles of the books in Shamrock's cases. He had to get his eyes off this dame. He was beginning to believe her.

"Why would I want to kill the girl?" she asked.

Mike stopped, shot a glance at her. She was watching him prowl the room. How could she be a killer and still look so innocent?

"She was beating your time, wasn't she?" he asked.

Mrs. Dexter laughed. "I'd have to be the original Lady Bluebeard if I ever started killing all Pete's girl friends."

"Then what was all this act we went through tonight chasing your old man and this blonde?" Mike demanded. "I suppose you just went to her room to find out who did her hair."

"I told you," Mrs. Dexter explained, "I wanted a divorce. I was tired of his philandering. But I wanted a little bargaining power in court. I certainly haven't got it with her dead!"

O'Reilly stopped in front of the sweep of curved windows behind Shamrock's desk. Over the dark lump of hills, he could see the crown of neon glow from L. A. He was awfully fed up with this whole thing.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, wearily.

She glided across the room, stood in back of him, so close she might brush against him. "Then you do believe me. You do."

Mike shook his head. "I'm not saying I do. But you've got me in this thing so deep now, the only way out is either play your way or make a complete damn fool of myself."

Her arms started to slip around his waist. He turned and met her lips. There was no escaping it, even if he'd wanted to. Mike O'Reilly was being kissed, by an expert.

He pushed her away from him. "Look," he said, quietly, "I don't know whether or not you killed your husband's playmate, but if Mrs. O'Reilly ever sees us like this, we won't have to worry about any murder but our own."

Mrs. Dexter looked up at him and moistened her lips, her eyes dancing. "I for one wouldn't blame her."

Shamrock broke it up. He entered, dangling Mike's car keys in a chubby hand. He tossed them to Mike. "There you are, Champ," he said, smiling. "A nice clean job. No muss, no fuss, no bother."

Mike turned to Mrs. Dexter. "Come on," he said, "I'll take you home."

CHAPTER THREE

Blonde, Beautiful—and Dead

MIKE O'REILLY tried to slide into bed beside his wife without disturbing her—which is tough enough with an easy conscience. It didn't help to have her lying there in the dark waiting for him to come home.

His head no more than touched the pillow, when she said: "O'Reilly. . ."

He raised on his elbows, moaning: "Huh?"

"Did you catch them?" she asked. "Mr. Dexter and his lady friend, I mean."

"Yeah, sure." He sighed, matter-of-fact. He made noises like a man who intended to get some rest.

Mrs. O'Reilly wasn't impressed. "Was it bad?"

"Pretty bad," he admitted.

"There wasn't any trouble?" She sounded worried.

Mike blinked into the dark. He was glad she couldn't see his face. He'd never get away with it. "No," he said.

"How was Mrs. Dexter?" Winifred asked. "Did she take it all right?"

Mike strangled himself in his pillow. "Don't worry about that dame," he mumbled, flopping over on his side. "She can take care of herself in the clinches."

He thought she was satisfied. He smiled at the dark wall and started to doze.

"Mike," she said.

"Huh?" he groaned.

"Is she very pretty? Mrs. Dexter."

"She'll do," he replied cagily. "If you go for her type."

Winifred said: "Oh."

She let him slide almost around the corner of sleep before asking: "Will you be seeing her any more? I mean, is the case finished?"

Mike responded with a weary "Uh-huh," trailed off into a phony snore. Maybe Winifred didn't believe it, but she got the idea.

He was faking sleep so hard he never knew when it was real. . .

The next morning, Mike beat his wife to the punch by announcing he'd decided to go out to his manager's ranch and start getting in shape for his fight. "I can use a couple of extra weeks," he said. "I'm hog fat."

Winifred looked at him critically, while buttering a slice of toast for little Mike. "When are you planning to leave?"

Mike concentrated on his ham and eggs. "This morning."

He knew she was looking at him, but he didn't care to risk meeting her eyes. He growled into his chest: "Is it O. K. with you?"

"Of course," she replied. "Have some more coffee?"

He rounded up the last of his breakfast and shoveled it into his mouth. "No, thanks."

He left the table silently.

Little Mike watched his dad until the swinging door snapped him from sight.

"Mommie," he said, "what's eating Pop?"

Winifred frowned. "Nothing, Mike," she replied sternly. "Now eat your eggs."

She watched the little guy nudge scrambled egg on his fork with an active, greasy thumb and wished she had someone to assure her everything was all right with O'Reilly.

Joe Szibuitski's ranch was a one-crop affair: cauliflower. His farming methods would never make him an outstanding member of the grange, but when it came to turning out beat-up ears, he made those sun-baked acres of sand, mesquite and boulders pay off.

He had two of the most wildly cocked eyes and one of the straightest hearts in any man's game. The eyes earned him his handle: "The Mad Polack." And his heart belonged to Mike O'Reilly.

There were other boys working out there all the time, but when Mike tossed his bag on the front porch and said he was ready to start training, Joe looked in four directions all at once and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Good, Mike," he said. "I'm glad you're giving yourself plenty of time. "This 'Kraut' Meyer is going to be a tough cookie."

Mike smiled good-naturedly. Joe always did the worrying for them. "Think he'll take me, Joe?"

His manager focused one eye on him. He jabbed Mike in the ribs with a flat, stiff hand. Mike buckled a little.

"He will," Joe said, "if we don't get rid of that gut."

Mike picked up his bag and followed Joe into the house. "O. K., sweetheart—let's go to work."

THE NEXT couple of weeks they sweated the lard out of him. A dry creek bed cut through one corner of Joe's ranch. Between roadwork, sparring and workouts in the barn Joe had converted to a gym, his manager let him relax by tossing boulders from one side of the creek to the other. His hands got hard, his muscles toughened, his stomach flattened to a granite slab.

Winifred brought little Mike out weekends. They hardly recognized this lean, pantherish, sun-blackened man.

Nothing was ever said about Mrs. Dexter.

Mike watched the papers for some indication that Dexter's kitten, Miss Morgan, had been missed. But apparently no one saw anything strange in her disappearance from her hotel. O'Reilly concluded a girl in her spot can drop out of sight without exciting much interest.

By the time he swung into the final weeks of training, the whole incident could have happened to someone else. The fight had crowded everything else out of his mind.

Mike wound up training with a series of exhibition bouts with his sparring partners. The local sports gathered

round and he gave them a good show. He let them see he was as fast, as deadly as ever, but kept his Sunday punch under wraps. He wasn't paying his sparring partners for the privilege of flattening them.

Joe was pleased as hell with him. Mike could tell, the way he rode him all the time he was on the rubbing table. "You stink!" he said, waving his arms and trying to focus his eyes. "The 'Kraut' will knock you kickin'!"

Mike laughed, relaxing under the flying hands of the rubber. "Let's put some dough on the guy and make a killing. They tell me the odds are eight to five in my favor."

"You think it's funny?" Joe raved. "If I had any sense that's what I'd do. I'd mortgage my shirt!"

Mike slid off the table and headed for the showers. He wadded the towel he'd had around his waist and fired it at his manager. "Hock this too, Joe," he laughed, "and get it down for me."

Mike felt pretty good when he'd dressed. He went out to shoot the breeze with a couple of the sports writers who were still hanging around the gym. There was a lot of ribbing going on. One of the scribes asked him what he thought about his opponent.

"I'll moider da bum," Mike laughed.

Joe came over and put a damper on the party with a wild, cockeyed stare. He started herding the boys to their cars.

Mike waved goodbye and started up the path to the house. One of their guests, who had somehow escaped Joe, fell in step with him.

"Hey Champ," he said, "can I see ya a minute?"

Mike placed him right away. It was Jake Shamrock's hood. "Yeah, what's on your mind?"

"You looked good up there, Champ," he smiled, "awfully good. Think ya'll whip Meyer?"

"I'm gonna try." Mike was suddenly defensive.

"I just wondered," the man said, casually. "Shamrock's layin' out heavy sugar you won't. I think he owns a piece of Meyer."

"So what?" Mike asked.

"Well, I just thought you guys was pretty good friends," the hood replied, shooting his cuffs nervously.

Mike grabbed the man's narrow shoulder and gripped it down to the bone. "Knock off the double-talk," he growled. "What'd Shamrock send you here to say?"

"Take it easy, Champ." The hood tried to squirm free. "I just wanted to get the straight dope."

Mike let go and Shamrock's stooge massaged his shoulder.

"What dope?" he asked.

"Shamrock thinks you might be willin' to return a favor," the hood explained.

"By throwing the fight?" Mike asked, snarling. "Tell him to go to hell!"

The hood back-pedaled down the path. He took an envelope out of his pocket and sailed it toward Mike.

"Thanks for the tip, Champ. I'll tell him."

He turned and ran to his car.

Mike picked up the envelope. It contained a picture—of Aileene Morgan, blonde, beautiful, and dead. She was lying in the front seat of his car, blood and death all over her. It was his car, the registration slip on the steering post was turned toward the camera. Someone had circled it, so he wouldn't miss it.

He put the picture back in the envelope and slipped it in his pocket. He walked thoughtfully to the house.

Joe wouldn't like it—his leaving the ranch two days before a fight. But there was only one thing to do. He had to go to Hollywood.

He was right. Joe gave him hell.

MIKE didn't tell his manager what was behind the trip, but he finally talked him into it. He even borrowed Joe's car, promising to be back in time for "taps."

It was about an hour's drive to the Villa Barcelona, just long enough for Mike to organize what he was going to tell Mrs. Dexter.

He called her from the house phone in the lobby. She was in to him, but

definitely. Mike remembered the kiss she had planted on him at Shamrock's and wondered if he needed a chaperon.

The Villa consisted of a number of separate haciendas scattered fetchingly around the main building which housed the lobby. Mike took instructions from the desk clerk as to how to locate Mrs. Dexter's apartment and trotted out optimistically. Fortunately, the lady was on the lookout for him and rescued him from the jungle before it was too late.

Mrs. Dexter was home alone. Apparently her old man hadn't changed his mind about her. Mike took in the chartreuse lounging pajamas with their chinee gold trimming. The way she filled it out, he knew the guy had to be nuts.

She maneuvered him onto a love seat before her fireplace and sat down beside him. She was terribly pleased he had dropped in, but a little surprised.

"I supposed you'd be in training for your fight?"

Mike nodded. "I am."

"How is it going?" she asked, smiling. She put a cigarette in her mouth and leaned forward for Mike to light it. Ever so accidentally she brushed against him.

Mike lighted her cigarette, easing away from her to the limit of the love seat. "O. K.," he responded, remembering the main chance, "until this afternoon."

"What happened?" She registered sisterly concern.

"Jake Shamrock's stooge brought me a comic valentine," he replied, evenly. "Only it wasn't so funny."

Mrs. Dexter looked perplexed. "A comic valentine?"

"Yeah." Mike handed her the envelope. "What do you think if it?"

Her take was real. "My God!" she said.

"Mine too." Mike commented through his teeth.

Her eyes were large, apprehensive. "What did he want?" she asked, slipping the picture back in its envelope and tossing it on the cocktail table.

Mike twisted his mouth in an ironic smile. "Not much," he said. "Just the fight."

"You mean he wanted you to lose the fight, deliberately?"

"Correct."

She blinked at him, fluffing her hair nervously with her long fingers. The velvet jacket tightened until the gold dragon howled. "It's my fault—all my fault!" she said.

Mike didn't contradict her. "I was afraid of something like this," he said, "when the big heel was so willing to give you a hand. The question is—what are we going to do about it?"

Mrs. Dexter untwined her legs and walked to the fireplace. She turned and faced Mike. "Surely you have some idea?"

He rubbed the mushroom he used for a left ear. "Right," he replied. "I'm going to whip Meyer, if I can, then collect you and this picture and see if we can beat Shamrock to the cops with our story."

She closed her eyes and swayed back against the mantle. "Very well. I'll do anything you say."

Mike felt uneasy. He knew what she was agreeing to. No cop in his right mind would believe she hadn't killed the blonde—he wasn't too sure himself that she hadn't.

"I don't want you to think I'm a rat," he said, trying to soften his demand. "I'd play along with you, if only to keep out of it myself. But I can't take a dive either. Too many little guys get hurt. I'd rather take my chances getting nailed for not going to the police in the first place."

She sat down again, close enough so their knees touched. She laid her hand on his.

"I understand, Mike," she said, very quietly. "I should never have turned to Shamrock for help. I'm willing to stand the consequences."

He couldn't be outdone by this dame. Mike O'Reilly was a decent guy, too. He took her hand.

"Maybe we'll beat this thing," he said. "I'll do anything short of playing Shamrock's game to help you."

Mrs. Dexter looked deep into his face, searching. "Do you think I killed Miss Morgan?" she asked.

Mike shook his head. "Not if you say you didn't," he replied, hypnotically.

"Would you help me prove I didn't?"

The warmth of her hand, the earnest pleading in the way she looked at him had to be answered. Mike heard himself say: "Yes."

Mrs. Dexter smiled. "Then there's a chance we may clear this whole thing up before Shamrock can do anything. Tonight, if you can go with me for a few hours. . ."

Mike considered the lacing he'd take from his manager if he wasn't back pronto. On the other hand, if he could square this beef in a few hours, it would be all to his advantage. He could catch up the sleep before the fight.

"O. K.," he said, "they're your dice."

She withdrew her hand and lighted a cigarette. She had, she explained, been working on the angle that the man who gave her the key to Miss Morgan's room was somehow involved in the shooting.

"I believe I've located him," she continued, watching the smoke spiral from the tip of her cigarette. "He plays piano at the Paddock Club in downtown L. A. That's where Miss Morgan worked before she met Peter and he started footing her bills. I think you—" she looked meaningfully at Mike's broad shoulders—"might persuade him to talk."

Mike was already on the hook. He just wagged his head in agreement.

Mrs. Dexter changed to something a little more appropriate for nightclubbing, and they drove downtown.

THE PADDOCK Club was a basement dive. It got its name from a craze for adult-size rocking horses which were the feature attraction. The boys and girls romped around the dance-floor on their wooden steeds. It was simply too hilarious.

The walls were decorated with horsy murals and the booths were supposed to look like stalls.

Mike and Mrs. Dexter got a booth named "Moonbeams Express." He was careful to keep the top half of the "stall" door open.

A waiter in a red coat came over and took their order—Scotch and soda for Mrs. Dexter, a coke for Mike.

Six bored characters on the bandstand rasped out what passed for a rumba. About ten couples on the floor writhed under a spot which changed color with ghastly effectiveness. Their rumba came in the same package with the band—phony. The girls wiggled their fannies, which was all that was expected.

The clarinetist piped them off the floor after the number, and the band broke up and left the stand.

A tiny white piano was wheeled into the center of the floor by a tall, skinny guy with a horn which would make Jimmy Durante look like a Boston bull pup. He blew into the mike experimentally, smiling at the customers.

He cracked a couple of corny gags, then sat down at the piano and chirped a pornographic song into the mike. He got a big hand.

Mrs. Dexter touched O'Reilly's arm across the table. "That's the man," she said.

He nodded.

When the waiter came back with their drinks, Mike slipped him a five for the pianist. "Ask him to come over to the table when he's through," he said.

The waiter smiled, knowingly.

He was billed as, "The Professor" and most of his act sounded like it was originally part of a burlesque routine. He had a public here.

When he wound up his turn, Mike saw their waiter corner him. The Professor looked over at their table and started across the floor. His fans claimed a lot of his attention, but he finally made it.

He stood there, looking from Mike to Mrs. Dexter—his face a mask. "Good evening, folks," he said.

Mike smiled and made room for him in their booth. "Have a seat."

The waiter showed up with a toothy grin and Mike asked their guest: "What are you drinking?"

"Rum-coke."

The waiter padded off and the entertainer turned to Mike. "Don't I know you?" he asked.

Mike nodded. "Could be."

The Professor studied him for a moment, then smiled. "Hell yes. You're Mike O'Reilly, the welter-champ of the world!"

Mike smiled and held up his hand. "Let's not advertise it, huh, chum?" he said. "I want you to meet a friend of mine, Mrs. Peter B. Dexter."

They exchanged smiles.

The waiter came back with his drink.

The Professor raised his glass. "Here's to sex—long may she wave!"

Mike felt his neck getting hot.

"Aren't you fighting in a couple of days, Champ?" the entertainer asked.

"I know what you're thinking," Mike smiled. "This is a funny place to do my training."

The Professor wrung a smile out of his lean, white face. "In this business it doesn't pay to think things like that, Champ."

Mike grinned good-naturedly and shoved a five across the table. "Then it's just between us?"

The Professor flipped it back to him. "Keep your money, Champ. The pleasure's mine." He finished his drink and looked nervously around the smoke-choked room. "As far as I'm concerned, you're Joe Doakes."

Mike watched him chain-light a cigarette. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it, Champ." He spouted smoke. "Have a good time. Nice meeting you—you too, Mrs. Dexter."

He squirmed out of the booth.

Mike turned to Mrs. Dexter. "That's him?" he asked, "You're sure?"

She nodded. "Positive."

He watched the Professor's heavily padded shoulders hunching through the crowd pouring onto the dance floor. "Frankly, I don't see how you could be wrong about a beak like that," he commented, dryly. "There's nothing like it outside a zoo."

Mrs. Dexter tapped a cigarette on a lacquered thumbnail. "What do you plan to do?"

Mike lighted her cigarette before he answered. "I don't know, but I think I'd better send you home. It might get a little rough."

She smoked a moment. "You're sure you don't want me to stay?"

He nodded. "Come on. I'll get you a cab."

He called the waiter over. "Save the booth," he said. "I'll be back."

The waiter gave him a wise grin and pocketed the tip Mike dropped in his hand.

He snagged a cruising cab for Mrs. Dexter. "I'll call and let you know how I make out," he promised.

CHAPTER FOUR

Out for Blood

MIKE went back down into the murky depths of the Paddock Club and wedged himself in his booth.

The waiter sidled up and looked in on him. Mike ordered another plain coke for himself.

"The lady?" the waiter asked.

"Gone home," Mike explained.

A worried frown greeted the announcement. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but you can't occupy the booth without a lady. House rule."

Mike said "Nuts," and started sliding out.

A big brunette dame in a sequin evening gown brushed by the waiter and piled into the booth on top of Mike. "Mine's Scotch," she told the waiter.

Mike slid back in the corner. When the waiter was gone with their order, she answered his confusion. "It's a racket," she explained. "A guy comes in here alone and sits in a booth—the waiter pitches him it's against the rules, and one of the girls comes to the rescue. The idea is you buy me drinks—Scotch and soda made with black tea. I get a cut on the bill, which will be plenty!"

The girl spun all this out nonchalantly, punctuating it with furious drags on a cigarette.

Mike didn't get it. "Why tell me?"

"Reverse pitch." She shrugged indifferently. "You'll think I care how big a

sucker you make of yourself. It pays better."

Their drinks came back and Mike paid the waiter. He rolled his tip off the tray with a leer. Before he left, he closed the top half of their "stall" door.

It made the booth damn cozy.

The girl sampled his drink. "My God!" she exclaimed, "Coke!"

Mike stared her down. The girl pasted a smile on her face and eased toward him. "Every man to his own poison," she said. "My name's Margo."

She fondled his biceps and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Daddy," she purred, "where did you get all those dreamy muscles?"

Mike squirmed. "Margo, look," he said, "I—"

She reached across him and spanned their two drinks with her hand. She put them beside her on the seat, then touched a button over the table. It rose and flattened against the wall. "You'll like it better this way," she said, aiming a kiss at his mouth.

Mike struggled free and stood up. Margo looked surprised, but not particularly hurt.

"Daddy doesn't play?" she pouted indifferently.

Mike shook his head emphatically. "No!"

She shrugged. "O.K.," she said, "let's have the table again. You can buy me drinks."

He pulled the table down off the wall, opened the top "stall" door while he was at it.

"What are you after," she asked, sipping her weak-tea Scotch, "atmosphere?"

"Look, sweetheart," Mike said roughly, "can't you just sit here and guzzle your tea?"

Margo shrugged again. "One thing about this racket. You sure meet all kinds of people." She drained her drink and buzzed for the waiter. "This is gonna cost you."

Mike smiled. "That's right. Break it off in me."

They listened to the effort of the band to imitate several name outfits. It was strictly murder.

Margo downed a couple more drinks. "Dance?" she asked.

Mike said: "No, thanks."

She looked at him puzzled. "What the hell do you do for amusement?"

He laughed. "I raise flowers."

Margo was stunned. She slapped her forehead. "Ye Gods, now I've heard everything!" She examined his bent ears. "The pansies fight back?" she asked.

"Giant pansies," he explained, deadpan.

"Yeah," she said, thoughtfully, "I thought your puss was familiar. Mike O'Reilly, the poor man's champion, as I live and laugh at what I call life!"

He nodded.

"Aren't you out of character, hanging around a joint like this?" she asked.

Mike scowled. "You're kind of nosey, aren't you, sister?"

"Maybe," she admitted, "but when a guy like you starts training in the dives, somethin's cookin'. You wouldn't care to tell little Margo all about it, would you?"

Mike appraised her for a moment. "You might have an angle at that."

"Get him!" she exclaimed. "I *might* have an angle! Listen, big shot—everything you see is mine, and it's right where you'd expect to find it!"

Mike chuckled. "What I mean, I'm interested in a girl named Aileene Morgan—a blonde. I understand she used to work here."

Margo brightened. "Aileene, sure—" she chirped. "She was one of my best friends. Why didn't you say so?"

"What happened to her?" Mike asked.

She ran her tongue around the rim of her glass. "Damn, I wish they'd fool me just once and spike these things," she commented. "Aileene—I don't know. The last I heard, she met some rich gee and gave this joint the brush. And who wouldn't?"

Mike toyed with his coke. "Know the guy?" he asked.

"Nope," she responded. "He never hung around here. Good thing for him, too. Aileene had the boss stuck on her. He didn't enjoy the doublecross a damn bit."

"The boss is a pretty tough guy, huh?" Mike asked.

Margo made a gun out of her hand and said: "Boom, boom!"

Mike smiled and called the waiter over and ordered another round. This time he ordered whiskey for himself. When it came, he slipped it across the table to Margo.

"Try this for size," he said, smiling down at her.

She looked into his smile. "Hold your hat under it, Daddy," she said. "You've hit the jackpot!"

Mike bought her drinks and Margo let Aileene's hair down all over the booth.

It was garden variety, peroxide blonde hair. If that's too subtle, let's put it this way: she was a Main Street tramp, strictly on the make for anything that smelled like money. She was a two-faced, jealous, vicious double-crosser trying to claw her way out of the gutter.

And Margo was Aileene's best friend. They went to the little girl's room together.

Which reminded her . . .

While she was gone, Mike put it together. He wasn't so interested in Aileene's character, as he was in the fact she'd had her hooks into Steve Drago, the boss of the Paddock Club. It might go some place. At least it gave him someone else who might have enjoyed knocking her off.

And there was a connection with the Professor—who, according to Mrs. Dexter, tried to shill her into Aileene's hotel room.

When Margo came back, Mike set her up to three whiskeys and asked her where the Professor hung out when he wasn't wowing the customers.

Margo tossed off one of her drinks, made an extremely unladylike face, gasping: "Probably up in Drago's office. They're old buddy-buddies."

"Where's the office?"

She pointed with her thumb. "Up the stairs by the john."

Mike pushed a double-sawbuck across the table. "Thanks, sweetheart. Buy yourself a drink while I'm gone."

DRAGO'S office had a metal sign on the door: *No Admittance*. Mike didn't argue with it, he just rapped twice and went in.

The Professor was stretched out on a shaggy davenport, a dishwater blonde sitting beside him. It must have been pretty routine. He acted indifferent enough to the intrusion.

"Scram, honey," he said to the blonde.

She fluffed her hair and left without a word.

The Professor smiled. "What can I do for you, Champ?" he asked. "The boss is out right now."

He made no move to leave the davenport, or even sit up, so Mike brought a chair over.

"That's all right," he said. "I want to talk to you anyway."

"Shoot."

Mike studied the Professor's languid form, the half-closed eyes staring bemused down his terriffic nose.

"You didn't," he began, "recognize the lady I had with me earlier—Mrs. Dexter?"

The Professor smiled sleepily and shook his head. "I meet a lot of people, Champ."

"You'd remember her," Mike remarked. "A couple months ago you approached her while she was sitting in my car in a parking lot next to the Parker Hotel."

"I did?" the entertainer asked. "I think you've got the wrong boy, Champ."

Mike shook his head. His eyes narrowed. "Not with that trademark of yours. You gave her the key to Aileene Morgan's room and suggested she go up and have a talk with her."

The Professor seemed bored. "Why would I do that?"

"You tell me!" Mike snapped.

The entertainer sat up and leaned on his skinny knees. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, evenly. "I know the Parker, and Aileene Morgan used to work here. But the rest of this is news to me."

Mike grabbed his lapel and half-dragged him off the davenport. "You're

going to look damn strange with this king-size schnozz bent around under your left ear," he growled. "Stop stalling!"

The Professor paled under his already pasty coloring. "I'm levelling with you, Champ." He moistened his lips. "I—"

Mike slapped him with his open hand.

He fell back against the davenport, rubbing the red welts Mike's fingers raised on his face. "What do you want," he sounded frightened, "blood?"

"I want some straight answers!" Mike snipped the words off between his teeth.

"Why don't you accommodate the gentleman, Professor?" A silky voice came over Mike's shoulder. "Our customers are always right."

Mike turned to find he was rating a lot of attention from a glittering automatic in the hand of a sharpie, who was just closing the door behind him.

"Boss!" the Professor bleated gratefully.

Mike watched Steve Drago take off his spotless gray hat and toss it on his desk. His dark, slanty eyes never left Mike's face.

"What seems to be the trouble?" Drago asked softly.

"Some blister named Dexter sicked him on me," the entertainer sneered.

"Yeah?" Drago leaned back against his desk and fished a cigarette out of a box. He lighted it without shifting his eyes from Mike.

"What's the beef, Champ?"

O'Reilly knew this dark-skinned, slanty-eyed man was no guy to get funny with. But he couldn't bicycle out of the corner he was in.

"Nothing serious," he flipped. "Just a mild case of murder."

Drago smiled crookedly. "Good. I was afraid it was important, the way you were slapping the Professor around."

"What a character, boss!" The entertainer waved his skinny arms. "He has me over to his table tonight and introduces me to this Dexter tomato. Then he crashes in here and claims I gave Mrs. Dexter the key to Aileene Morgan's room at the Parker—a couple of months ago, he says. Now it's murder! I think he's taken one too many on the kisser."

"Yeah, I'm punchy," Mike commented acidly. "I'm just punchy enough to think your stooge here conned Mrs. Dexter into a spot where you could square things with Aileene and make it look like she did it!"

Drago smoked the rest of the way down his cigarette before he replied. His eyes were narrow, glittering slits. "Champ, you just bought yourself a load of trouble."

He reached back and jabbed a buzzer-button on his desk. A couple seconds later the door opened and two torpedoes shouldered their way into the room.

Mike looked around Drago's office. There were three guns covering him. There might be a way out of this jam. Right then he didn't see it.

They muscled him out of the club and drove toward the southwest fringe of the city. The oil fields were the last thing Mike remembered. One of Drago's men blacked him out with a sap.

When he came to he was in a basement, somewhere. He'd been tied to a chair. They'd just thrown a pan of cold water in his face. He felt it soaking in over his shoulders. A single, large, blue bulb dangled on its cord from the ceiling.

Drago, the Professor, and the two trained apes who'd brought him there were ranged around him. Drago was speaking through a nasty smile: "The real thing isn't much like the movies, is it, Champ?"

Mike tried to chew an answer through his gag.

Drago was amused. "No, Champ, Dick Tracy is strictly for kids," he sneered. "You're a big boy now. It's time you found out what happens when a guy gets too smart for his own racket."

Drago nodded to the two gorillas. They took lengths of rubber hose to Mike. They were experts. A couple of times he passed out and they stopped long enough to douse him with cold water so he'd be conscious enough to enjoy the treatment.

The smirking face of the ginney danced in front of Mike every time he opened his eyes.

O'Reilly had weathered several bad moments like this in the ring, back when he was first starting as a fighter. The whole thing became a nightmarish whirl of faces, forms, and pain fusing into a numbing cloud.

The last time he was conscious of anything, he heard Drago telling him: "This is just a sample, Champ. Crack to the cops an' you'll think this is a picnic. You wouldn't want anything to happen to your wife and kid."

He went under, too far for cold water to find him.

MIKE shook the hot sand out of his head and opened his eyes. He was looking up at the sky, just turning a pale, morning blue. Slowly, painfully he oriented himself. He was lying in a ditch.

He sat up groggily, looked around. There was a street sign across the road. He stumbled as best he could over to read it.

"Western Avenue," it said. He looked around, made out the hunkering shapes of oil wells.

A car shot by, whipping small bits of gravel at him. He wondered how far he would have to go before he'd get a lift. No driver would stop for a guy in his condition—not on this deserted stretch of road.

He groaned and started walking down the road.

He fell a couple of times. Cars passed him, their headlamps graying in the morning light.

He was just getting up, when a panel-truck screeched to a stop. A tow-headed kid about eighteen smiled at him above the wheel.

"Hey, mister—use a lift?"

Mike nodded and shuffled across the road. The kid was holding the door open.

He started to say something about it being against somebody's rules for him to pick up hikers. Then Mike was close enough for him to really see.

"Holy smoke, mister!" he said. "What hit you?"

Mike eased his back against the leather seat and got the door shut. "Rolled," he answered through his tightly clenched teeth.

Tow-head raced the truck in second gear. "You ain't kiddin'," he said. "Where can I take ya—cops?"

Mike shook his head. "Cab," he said, closing his eyes.

They found a hack out by the end of the Western Avenue car line. Mike thanked the kid and gave the driver instructions for finding Joe Szibuitski's ranch before passing out . . .

He came to with the hackie shaking him. He was saying: "Here we are, mister."

Mike got out and stumbled toward Joe's front porch. The door opened, Joe and Winifred came running toward him. He tried to smile. "Pay the driver, will you, Joe?"

He folded.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in bed. Joe, Winifred, a doctor, and several of Joe's fighters were ringed around the bed. He grinned the best he could.

"Nothing serious," the doc was saying. "A bad lacing, but he'll be all right with a little rest."

Mike grinned again and reached out for Winifred's hand. She looked worried.

"How do you feel, Mike?" the doc asked.

"O.K.," he replied. He was surprised how weak he sounded.

Winifred couldn't speak, everything was in her eyes.

"What happened?" Joe asked.

Mike looked at Winifred, thought of her and little Mike, remembered Drago's threat. "Rolled," he replied hoarsely.

Joe waved Mike's billfold. "How come they passed up all this dough?"

Winifred held out an envelope. "Would this have anything to do with it?" she asked. "It fell out of your pocket when we were undressing you."

It was the picture of Aileene Morgan, dead in the front seat of his car.

Mike scowled. "Doc, would you and the boys mind?" he whispered. "I'd like to talk to Joe and Winnie."

When the others withdrew, he told

the two of them the whole thing: Mrs. Dexter's marital difficulties, finding her and the dead blonde, the drive out to Shamrock's, the gambler's bid to get him to throw the fight, what happened at the Paddock Club and after, Drago's threat if he went to the police.

"I know I've loused everything," he concluded, weakly. "I won't be able to show my face in the ring again."

Joe had been studying Aileene's picture, rolling first one, then the other eye at it. When Mike was finished, he stuck the picture in his pocket. "Yeah," he remarked, absently. "You get some sleep, kid. You're gonna need all the rest you can get between now an' the fight after that beating."

He walked around Mike's bed and took Winifred's arm. "He'll be O.K., honey," he said, somehow managing to sound tender.

Mike half-rose on his elbow. "But Joe, I—"

"Shuddup," Joe growled, "an' go to sleep!"

He made a comic pass at Mike with the back of his hand.

O'Reilly grinned and slid down into the covers. He watched the door close quietly after Joe and Winifred.

He shut his eyes.

The next day, Joe and the trainer worked over Mike's sore muscles. With lights and wintergreen and easy workouts they softened him up enough to get by the medical examiners at the weighing in.

Joe stayed with him, took him to the hotel and kept him in bed the rest of the afternoon. He practically hand-fed him his dinner.

Everything considered, Mike felt pretty fair when they left for the stadium. He didn't know how much punishment he could take, or what kind of a show his legs would give him, but if he could get to Meyer early in the fight he might stand a chance. A damn slim chance.

Joe didn't seem worried.

"You're gonna take this bum, Mike," Joe said, grimly, "if I have to slug him with your water bottle!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Killer Instinct

THE CROWD belonged to Mike—the roar started before he got to the ring and when he stepped through the ropes they shook the house down. He pinned a grin on his face and waved. He wondered how many would help carry him out, if Meyer won the fight.

Most of the stadium was a dark, smoky cloud of faces. Only ringside, lighted by the blazing floods overhead, bore a relation to anything human. Mike looked at the newsmen whapping away at their portables, their chins practically resting on the canvas. He nodded to several of the boys whom he knew.

Then he froze.

Joe was right beside him, grinning like an idiot, his eyes positively berserk.

"What's the matter, Champ?" he chirped.

Mike pointed his bandaged hand at the first row, ringside. "Those people . . ." he gasped.

Joe turned so he could see them, too. "Yeah," he grinned, "Some party. Rounded 'em all up at Jake Shamrock's. We had a tough time gettin' 'em to come, but the boys talked 'em into it without too much trouble."

Mike leaned on the ropes and looked down at Joe's "party." Boys from his stable had the row in back of them. Nobody, except the fighters, looked happy to be there.

Shamrock, Drago, and their hoods were the saddest of the lot. Joe's kids had showed real enthusiasm when they passed out the invitations. There wasn't a handful of teeth left in the crowd. The Professor's horn was smeared all over his face.

Charlie Wingate was there, nursing a thick lip and a shiner; so was Attorney Brown, Margo, Mrs. Dexter, and—

"Recognize the blonde on the end?" Joe grinned, pulling Mike over and putting him on his stool.

Mike's bandaged hands were inspected

and Joe slipped his gloves on, laughing all the time.

O'Reilly figured he must look good and stupid, but—

"Sure, it's your little sweetheart, Aileene Morgan," Joe chuckled, "alive and kickin'. I do mean kickin'—the boys had to just about hogtie her to get her here."

Mike shook his head. "I don't get it."

"You will, sonny boy," Joe slapped his bare shoulder, "but right now the man wants to introduce you to the bum you're fightin'."

After the referee had finished instructions, Mike came back to his corner. He still looked puzzled.

"Don't let it worry you, kid," Joe counseled. "Just go out there and dump that big tramp in her lap!"

Mike started to say something, but Joe shoved his mouth protector in his face.

The bell.

Meyer met him in the center of the ring. They touched gloves. Meyer crouched, but not quick enough. Mike caught him with a left cross which traveled about a foot and nearly tore his head off.

Meyer shook his head right into Mike's right glove.

Kraut was in trouble. Mike clubbed him with both hands, driving him to the ropes over Joe's "party."

He leaned on a straight right over Meyer's heart and the Dutchman went through the ropes, staggered a moment on the lip of the ring, then sprawled headlong into Mrs. Dexter and Miss Morgan.

Mike leaned on the ropes and waved before he let the ref chase him to a neutral corner.

"Kraut" had a lot of help getting back in the ring. Joe's fighters tossed him back, bodily.

He staggered to his feet and tried to cover up under Mike's rush. He did manage to clinch and dance out the rest of the round.

The bell.

Mike ran to his corner. His trainer got a stool under him, took the mouth protector and gave him a swig of water. Mike spat into his pail and looked around for Joe.

His silly grin was still there. "Great, kid," he chortled, "you're absolutely doin' great!"

Mike took a deep breath to satisfy his trainer, who was holding his trunks out from his body. "I still don't see how you figured she wasn't dead," he gasped into Joe's big smile.

Joe slapped his shoulder. "Go out and murder this square-head, and you will!" he promised.

The horn. Joe shoved the mouth protector into place and crawled through the ropes.

The bell.

Mike shot across the ring like a jet-propelled job. He landed on Meyer before he was well off his stool. Mike's left dug into the Dutchman's solar plexus, his right whistled to his whiskers.

Meyer's eyes folded back, glazed and he tumbled in a heap at Mike's feet. Mike trotted to a neutral corner, while the ref's arm clocked off ten strokes.

THE referee met him in the center of the ring and held up his hand. For the first time, Mike was aware of the frenzied yelling of the fight mob.

It was the kind of kill that had them swinging from the rafters. He waved and flashed a smile.

Joe trotted across the ring with his robe. He was howling like everybody else.

Mike yelled in his ear: "All right. I still want to know how you did it!"

Joe pointed to "Kraut" Meyers corner. The Dutchman's handlers had him propped on his stool. He was still out, his jaw gaping open. "See him?" Joe yelled. "Now look at this picture."

He held Aileene Morgan's picture for Mike.

"Her mouth!" Joe screamed. "Her mouth! She's got it closed, see? Miss 'Fancy-Pants' had to look pretty for

(Continued on page 130)

BULLET FINGERPRINTS

By
Lon Clark

(Star of "Nick Carter," Mutual Broadcasting System)

THE smart modern professional is a very cagey character when compared to his prototype of a generation or so ago. For instance, he leaves no fingerprints as damning evidence because he now wears gloves when engaged in his nefarious business. He manages to make identification of his pistol almost impossible by removing the serial numbers and other identifying marks from the weapon, and so on.

But fortunately, the scientific criminal investigator or master detective manages to keep at least two steps ahead, and the culprit is eventually apprehended and convicted.

When a firearm is discharged during the commitment of a crime or at any other time, for that matter, that gun leaves its own indisputable signature, or we might say, its individual fingerprints. For it is impossible for two guns to mark or disfigure the bullets and cartridge cases in exactly the same way. Thus the ballistic expert, with the aid of special instruments, can identify a bullet or cartridge case as having been fired in a specific firearm.

The problem of the master detective, as far as identification of firearms is concerned, may be divided into six subdivisions: given a bullet to determine the type and make of firearm from which it was fired; given a fired cartridge case to determine the type of firearm in which it was fired; given a bullet and a suspected firearm to determine whether or not the bullet was fired from the suspected firearm; given a fired cartridge case and a suspected firearm to determine whether or not the cartridge case was fired in the suspected firearm; given two or more bullets to determine whether or not they were fired from the same gun; given two or more cartridge cases to determine whether or not they were fired in the same gun.

Let us rig a hypothetical case for the purpose of following the master detective from step to step in his scientific plan or schedule for firearms identification. Remember, these markings furnish evidence more reliable than the testimony of eye-witnesses.

We will assume that a .38 caliber full metal jacket bullet removed from the body of a murder victim is at hand. The bullet weighs approximately 130-grains, has a diameter of about .359-inch, and a length of a little over .58-inch.

We also have a fired .38 automatic pistol semi-rimless cartridge case which was picked up at the scene of the crime. These two items are called "evidence" and marked for identification.

Now, the rifling marks on the bullet show that it was fired from a pistol whose rifling has a left-hand pitch or twist.

From these facts the firearms identification expert knows that the bullet may have been fired from a Colt .38 caliber automatic pistol, and suggests that such a weapon may have been the murder arm. So a search is made and it is found that one of the suspects is in possession of an almost new Colt super .38 automatic pistol.

This is a lucky break because a new arm may leave a more definite set of

marks on a bullet and cartridge case than an old well worn gun.

The scientific criminologist now loads the weapon in question with ammunition similar to that used in the commitment of the crime and proceeds to fire it into a bullet recovery box where the bullets are not deformed by impact. The recovered bullets and cases are marked "test" for identification purposes and our master detective goes to work with the comparison microscope.

The object of the comparison microscope is to determine whether or not both the "evidence" cartridge case and the "test" cartridge case have *exactly* the same markings impressed on them by their impact against the breech face of the arm, or if both bullets have *exactly* the same scratches and marks on them from their passage over the irregularities in the barrel of the gun.

This instrument consists of two laboratory type microscopes mounted on a stand side by side and fitted with a special comparison eye-piece. This eye-piece is a bridge which fits on to the eye-pieces of both microscopes. In the middle it has a single eye-piece of its own.

Half the image from the right-hand microscope and the other half from the left-hand microscope are combined in the comparison eye-piece. The two bullets or cartridge cases are mounted under the objective lens of the two microscopes forming the instrument. The observer, looking into the single eye-piece in the middle of the bridge, sees what appears to be one bullet. In other words the two bullets are seen as though they were sliced in two and the cut parts placed together. This enables an extremely critical comparison to be made, and the differences in width and shape of the lands, grooves, scratches, etc., are readily apparent.

If after careful study it is determined that the "evidence" and the "test" bullets and fired cases were from the same gun, the photomicrographic camera is brought into play and the damning evidence photographed. The photograph of enlargement is then used for display and evidence in the court room.

THE END

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(Continued from page 63)

and looked at her husband. Dorn said again in his plaintive voice: "What is this?"

"It's murder," I said. "Our friend, Costain, killed Johnny Wingate."

COSTAIN'S body seemed to sag for an instant, and his face turned gray. Then he said in a tight voice: "I thought you knew better than that, Fiske."

"You tried hard," I said. "You almost convinced me. Your alibi with the landlady was good, and so was your frank admission of motive. And the gun—I supposed you paid Lester to steal it from Dorn's desk for you?—I liked that part. You even defended Dorn, saying that the gun was an obvious plant, but yet you knew the suspicion would be there—against Dorn. And you weren't curious enough about the killing—you didn't ask enough questions. And that jacket you're wearing. Before Wingate died he tried to tell Louette something. I know how he was attempting to describe the man who shot him. He said two words—'bush' and 'jack.' He was trying to tell her how you were dressed—he wanted to say 'bush jacket'—that's what they call that type of coat, don't they?"

He looked around the room and laughed. "My lad, there's a million jackets like this."

"Maybe," I said, "but a few minutes ago you told Dorn that Wingate was shot three times. I didn't tell you how many times he was shot. But you knew how many slugs you had pumped into him and you let it slip."

He sighed deeply, and began to move slowly toward the door. "Very pretty, Fiske," he said mockingly. "All neat and trim and tied in a bow. But you must agree that it was worth a try—a girl like Lou and all that dough. Sure, I killed Wingate—with Dorn's gun. You were right about Lester getting it for me. When Louette told me tonight that she was going away with Wingate, I knew that could never, never be. I went to the dance hall ahead of her, and I sent a kid in to tell Wingate to come out. I

shot him and dropped the gun beside him. But Louette showed up a little sooner than I expected and I had to run for it. Then I went home and got into bed . . . Isn't it a hell of a world?"

Janet Dorn turned her head away and leaned against the wall. Dorn stood very still, his hands clenched at his sides.

Costain said: "Look, Fiske. You've got all the guns. I'm going to walk out of here. If you want to shoot—O.K. But make it good—they won't strap me in the electric chair." He opened the door. "Got it?"

"Don't try it," I said.

He laughed, whirled away from me, and the door banged behind him. I jumped to the door, jerked it open. He was running across the yard toward a vacant weedy lot next door. I aimed low, and squeezed the trigger of my .38 —once. Costain rolled like a wounded jack-rabbit. When I reached him, he was on his back with one leg crumpled beneath him. He looked up at me and there was sweat on his face.

"Damn you, Fiske," he panted. "You're a rotten shot. Higher."

Dorn came up and stood silently by. I handed him back his automatic and I went back into the house. Janet Dorn was crying a little, and the old guy and the woman just stared at me dumbly. Lester stared at the ceiling with tears running down his face. "It hurts, Mom," he kept mumbling.

I called the police.

Louette Hopkins went home with me after all, and I collected the five hundred bonus. Four months later I read in the paper that her mother had died, leaving all her estate to her daughter. Later on I heard that Louette had gone to Seattle and married a guy who owned ten salmon canneries.

Dick Costain was right—he didn't die in the chair for the murder of Johnny Wingate. He hanged himself in his cell at Columbus.

And every Christmas I get a hundred dollar check from Bill Dorn. Across the face of each check is written: *For services rendered.*

THE END

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(Continued from page 125)

her picture—even if she was supposed to be dead!"

The ring had become a madhouse. Cops were all over it, officials, newspapermen, radio announcers, fans.

Joe jostled his boy through the crowd. Everyone was slapping his back, tugging at his robe.

"But why?" Mike yelled over all the racket. "What was the angle?"

"Blackmail, kid," his manager hollered. "Shamrock's idea. Thought he could scare you enough, you'd lose to Meyer, or forfeit, even if you didn't take a dive. He owned a big slice of Meyer—he'd win either way."

Mike threw his arm around Joe's shoulder. "Ski," he said, "you're solid gold."

"Don't thank me," Joe screamed up at him. "Winifred's the one who figured this whole thing out. All I had was a hunch the tomato was playing possum. And I couldn't miss it. I seen too many guys knocked stiff!"

"Winifred . . ." Mike echoed, thinking of her sitting home at the radio. She never could stand to see him fight.

A beaming young man with a hand microphone was elbowing his way through the crowd. He caught Joe's attention, shrilling: "Just a minute. I want the champ to say a few words to our radio audience!"

Mike stood patiently, while the announcer gushed: "And now, ladies and gentlemen, we're in the champion's corner and he'll say a few words. Here he is: the Winner and Champion of the World—Mike O'Reilly!"

Mike's lips moved. "Thanks Winifred," he said, "thanks. I'm coming home now."

The announcer watched Mike choke up, his eyes fill with tears, as he turned and stepped through the ropes his manager was holding for him. For a minute, his glib tongue deserted him.

He caught himself: "That was the Welterweight Champion of the World, folks!" Adding, under his breath, "The big, muscle-bound jerk . . ."

THE END

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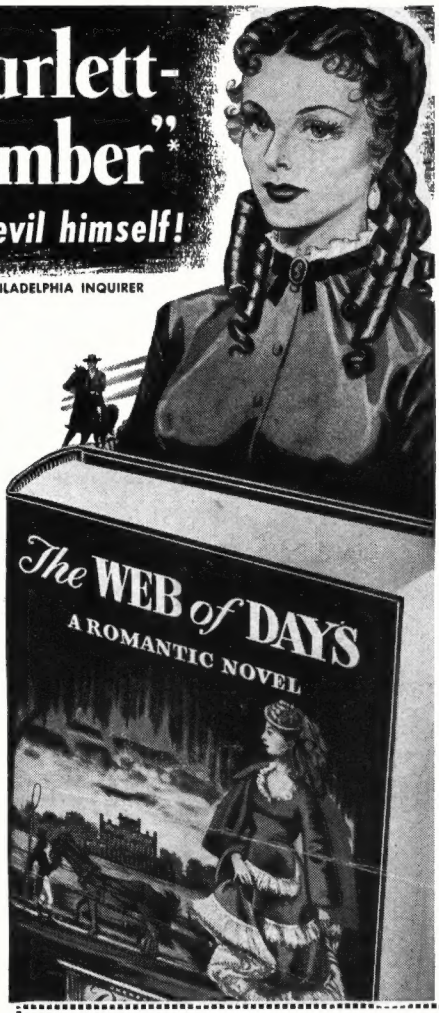

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